

New World 381

Chapter 381: Another Antecedence

"Seeing and knowing are distinct concepts. You should learn the difference."

A wall smiled.

"You speak of sight? Would the blind preach to the able?"

Helios inspected his hand.

"There is more than one way to see, and you shall soon know it."

Helios stared at me and clasped his armored hand into a fist.

"Listen, Harbinger. There's much to discuss and little time to do so."

I frowned.

"About the lottery?"

Helios's face gnarled.

"No. Of Elysium. Of Schema...And of my uncle."

My eyes sharpened.

"What about Elysium?"

Helios sighed.

"Let's have the lich be here."

I sent the status message, and a minute later, Torix walked out of a short-range warp.

"Ah, it's good to see everyone. Whatever is the matter-"

Torix's eyes flared.

"Helios? It's good to see you're alive and well."

Helios raised his brow.

"You're still in your disciple's old flesh?"

Torix's eyes turned white.

"Of course. And it's still stronger than yours."

I reached out a hand, and Torix gave me a high five. Helios shook his head.

"Children."

I pointed at Torix.

"Speaking of your body, I need to make you a new one."

Torix raised his palms.

"I doubt I could handle the mana production of your current build."

I frowned.

"Actually, I found a way to help ease that process. I met this mage called Targask. He taught me a few different kinds of magic, including ways of making mana easier to handle."

Torix supported his chin with a fist.

"Hm, he sounds like an interesting fellow. Could we meet?"

I shook my head.

"No. He's dead."

Torix shook his head.

"A shame. What is the method he shared?"

Helios tapped his foot.

"Perhaps save the sorcerial conversations for later?"

Torix shook his hands.

"Of course. Do excuse me. I've been rather easy to distract as of late."

Plazia walked over, magic oozing from him. His insects writhed across the ground, cooing for his favor. The bugs died as a field crossed over us. Our isolation from our surroundings magnified tenfold, becoming something absolute. Plazia sat closer, forming a basalt throne as he did.

"Tell us, blind one. What is it we must speak of?"

Before speaking, I walked out of the room and confinement magic. I sent an invitation to my guild to Shalahora. Seconds later, he accepted it, and I messaged him to come

over. The Sovereign spawned from the ether. He sat down on an umbral chair of shadows.

"I arrive as asked."

Helios snapped his fingers, sitting down on a void ice chair.

"I shall speak of my experience and what I learned during my lottery."

Following the crew, I sat down on a gravity well.

"It sounds like ours. How much did Elysium interfere?"

Torix snapped his fingers, several undead spawning and interlocking beneath him. A throne of bones formed.

"From what Daniel's spoken of, we may ascertain that all the held lotteries were trifled with."

Helios bristled.

"Then it's as I expected. Elysium's forces have likely quintupled in an instant."

I leaned forward.

"How?"

Helios leaned back in his chair.

"It's the result of Elysium's actions. My lottery was called as all the others were. I was placed with five hundred rulers within an ancient, unknown ruin. We were told the conditions and given minutes to prepare. Seven of those present were albony. They were my kin...My brothers and sisters, including Victoria."

A pain boiled under the surface as Helios sneered.

"We immediately decided on roles, tasks, and objectives. We lacked the immediate power of the other rulers, but we chose to compensate through unity and cooperation. This involved being close, so we chose to gather after being warped to L-6. Considering the lack of warping, we'd need to find another way of finding each other."

Helios turned a palm.

"Considering the long-range consistency of psionics, we chose basic mind magic."

I winced, peering away. Helios nodded.

"It was a dire mistake."

Torix grabbed his chin.

"Elysium's agents intercepted the calls?"

Helios's lips shifted, showing his teeth.

"Yes. We weren't eliminated immediately. In fact, we found one another within the first few days. All seemed well. We evaded the other rulers, gathered resources, and established safety. The planet, while inhospitable, wasn't a wasteland."

Helios frowned.

"While we weren't equipped for such hardship, we found methods to manage. Several of my cousins hadn't practiced magic or combat in years, having grown fat and lazy. Victoria and I still competed, and we took charge of our group. However, as the days dragged onto months, something about Victoria was...Different."

Plazia's throne smiled, jagged grins spreading across it. The hivemind said,

This tale has been unlawfully obtained from Royal Road. If you discover it on Amazon, kindly report it.

"She was remade in Elysium's image?"

Helios sighed.

"It left us at a loss of who and what was happening. She steadily dismantled the others while we were unaware. In that isolation, I was surrounded by the smiles of bodies I knew but people I didn't. I was alone."

Remembering my solitary months on L-7, I grimaced.

"Yeah. That's hard."

Helios crossed a leg.

"I had a habit of sleeping within void ice. Initially, this kept me from being a victim of their insidious methods. I uncovered their treachery whenever they tried piercing my prison. I found an escape and became the hunted. Other rulers helped my corrupted kin, and I ran to the worst part of the world to bide time."

I grimaced.

"The ossuary?"

Helios tilted his head. I sat upright.

"Oh, it's my name for where the giant eldritch's bones piled up, and the strongest became monsters I called primevals. Other stuff too, but you already know about that."

Helios's jaw slackened.

"What?"

I waved my hands.

"Uh, never mind. Don't worry about it. What was the worst part of your planet?"

Helios pointed at me.

"Algae spread across the sky in the worst part of L-6, and colossal eldritch fell from these deformed clouds. They would battle for territories for their algae."

I nodded.

"Ok, now I know what you're talking about. That's pretty bad."

Helios pressed a fingertip to his temple.

"It was. I found sanctum among the colossi. Other rulers found me time and time again, but I escaped them. Eventually, I killed several of my kin and other rulers. I used the colossi against them, gaining an advantage."

Helios peered down.

"An advantage they shattered. They found a way of controlling the colossi and cornered me. I fought until my body had broken and my mind splintered. They implanted a Hybrid within me before I escaped their grasp. The implanted monster drilled through my bones, carving into my marrow."

Plazia's throne spawned eyes that peered at Helios. The hivemind said, "They used their twisted aberrations to search under your skin and mold your mind...This world will falter if we find their teeth and claws here."

My runes glowed.

"Their teeth will break, and their claws will shatter."

Helios's eyes grew distant.

"I never dreamed of facing those horrors, but I lacked the imagination to conceive of their potential. On L-6, my nightmares were when I wakened, my body changed to their plaything."

The room hummed from the activity above. Helios grabbed his mane while looking up. He let out a gasp of air before breathing in.

"The Hybrid eroded me from within, and I couldn't remove it. After embrittling my body, it left me a shade of what I was. There was no return. I sliced off my arm and leg. I tore out my eye. I did everything I could to live longer. It didn't matter. I was the walking dead, a puppet, a caricatured corpse."

Helios scoffed.

"I feared being a puppet of someone else all my life, yet I never imagined it would be from within. Hah. Haha."

Hearing Helios's hollow laugh hurt. Leaning forward, ascendant mana pooled beneath me as I imagined Elysium finding a way to my home and what they would do to it. My hands shook as I clasped them.

Torix tilted his head at Helios.

"But you lived?"

Helios stared at the ceiling. Taking another breath, Helios closed his eyes. A while passed, and he pulled his gaze back down while lowering his hands.

"I found life in death, and I was not idle in my chase. I hunted down several of their agents and uncovered their secrets. I learned they hatched this plot with all the lotteries and that Schema lacked any and all awareness of their interference. I also learned of Obolis's foreknowledge."

Helios peered away.

"I watched my body bleed and bend, knowing several artifacts in Obolis's storerooms could've saved me. If I had time, if we all had time, we wouldn't have been so weak and vulnerable. Then I considered it further - we never had to enter this little game. Obolis could've saved us all. He had chosen not to."

I took a breath, assimilating the ascendant mana beneath me.

"I'm sorry you figured that out the hard way. I learned because Obolis had no choice but to tell me."

Helios waved a hand.

"Save your apologies for someone who deserves them. I still remember when we first met. I threatened Althea's life to send you a message."

Helios covered his face.

"What did I tell you? I'm a reckless idiot. Fear me. Agh. It hurts to even think of it...I still am astonished that you haven't tortured me for it."

I shrugged.

"Don't tempt me."

Plazia leaned forward, beady eyes glistening underneath cracks in his armor.

"I volunteer."

Torix waved a hand.

"What other secrets did you uncover? We need every ounce of information we can glean from this."

Helios nodded.

"I understood that the other lotteries would result in the Empire's downfall. I also gained knowledge of their plot to ally with Daniel to gain access to his cities on Leviathan-7. That change happened during the galactic meeting."

My eyes deadened.

"Ally? With me?"

Helios peered off.

"That's the information I gathered. Regardless, you all know the rest. At my death, I put myself in a true stasis to prevent Schema from reforming me. I also wanted to ensure that none could pry me from my death unless it was the Harbinger."

Torix swung his hands in excitement.

"Ah, allow me. You've seen Daniel's resistance to Chrona's time magic. Therefore, you assumed his resistance would allow him to pierce the stasis, something even mind magic couldn't do. It also gave us time to rectify the Hybrid's effects on you."

Helios grinned.

"Precisely."

Torix tapped his temple.

"And you couldn't trust the other albony that returned. This strategy protected you from them as well. Clever. Very clever."

Helios grinned more.

I sighed.

"Well, that verifies a lot of what we already knew."

Plazia leaned onto a hand that rested on his throne.

"We no longer work off assumptions. We know these as facts. Elysium pierced Schema's informational veil, and we are still at the mercy of it. They may always manipulate the AI's rules to corner and divide us, and they will use any tactics conceivable to get what they want."

Plazia spread his hands, and his throne's eyes widened.

"They are evil incarnate. My fellow Ruhls and I stare in awe."

Torix tapped the edge of his bone throne.

"Perhaps, but perhaps not."

Helios nodded.

"I agree."

I furrowed my brow.

"What? Neither of you can be serious, right?"

Torix leaned back.

"I'm deathly serious."

I let out a chuckle. Torix's eyes flared.

"Do you find my thoughts funny?"

I waved a hand.

"No, you said deathly serious on a bone throne."

Torix peered down, then back up before he cackled.

"Ahh...And here I believed you had a bone to pick with me."

Helios dragged his hands down his face.

"It never stops."

Cutting right back to the topic, Plazia tilted his head.

"What logic supports your ideas?"

Helios sighed.

"It's an unfortunate reality, but Elysium's goals are noble. They intended to fix the issues within Schema's system, and this lottery has only exposed more of those faults."

I spread my hands.

"What the hell? No. That didn't happen at all."

Torix raised a palm.

"You've allowed your judgment to be clouded, disciple."

I raised a tensed hand.

"They're destroying people's minds and putting puppets in their place."

Torix turned a hand to me.

"To who? To how many? For what reasons? We lack many answers, so we are judging from a small vantage point of the situation. It is like watching a man cut off another man's leg. You may call that evil, but what if it was a surgeon saving a patient from an infection in his foot?"

I stood up.

"This is different."

Torix gave me a sharp glance.

"We don't know that for certain."

Plazia cackled in his chair.

"I can understand the necromancer justifying the use of other's bodies, but you-"

Plazia pointed at Helios.

"I can hardly imagine you justifying their position given what you've experienced. Are you certain you weren't remade in their image?"

Helios's eyes narrowed.

"Shalahora has already checked me. Has he checked you?"

Plazia tilted his head.

"He will not. And perhaps I should check your mind as well...But more thoroughly."

I reached out with Event Horizon, pressing on the others. I coiled the psyche-saturated aura around them like a snake squeezing a rat's neck. I seethed.

"No one is going to threaten a mind in my guild. No one."

The others froze in place. I narrowed my eyes.

"Is that understood?"

They nodded. I released them before taking a breath. I sat back down and took a moment. When was the last time I was this angry about anything? After massaging my temples, I murmured.

"Torix. Helios. You might be right. I'm...I'm angry and in the weeds here. I can't see the trees anymore, so I'm missing the big picture."

Helios gawked at me.

"Was that your aura?"

I nodded. Helios stared at his hands.

"That was...Palpable."

Torix brushed a shoulder pauldron.

"Like an Old One's presence. Remarkable, truly."

A pang of anger passed in my head at the comparison. They had no idea how wrong they were, but I let it go. If anything, I needed to quit checking other people and start checking myself. Taking a breath, I stretched out my hands to Helios and Torix.

"Ok, guys. Make your case."

Helios winced.

"You may not know the full extent of Schema's problems, but I've seen them in person many times. Our Emp-" He shook his head. "The Empire enslaved many species and planets, and they are desolate places and peoples. Whenever you pick up the skeptiles, you will understand that."

I furrowed my brow.

"It's that bad?"

Helios pinched the bridge of his nose.

"It's...It's worse. The Empire sacrificed many innocents for Obolis's artifacts. Cultures and societies have been destroyed in greed's wake."

I shook a hand.

"But Elysium is controlling people's minds. You can't even have free will with them."

Torix crossed his arms.

"Is Schema so different?"

I leaned back. Torix turned a hand.

"You were trapped in BloodHollow initially before being trapped on earth with a quarantine. Then Schema trapped you with an unknown status, then with your position in a war against Elysium. It's never stopped. He trapped you in the lottery. Where is your free will in any of those circumstances?"

My shoulders dropped.

"I...I did get a choice. I chose to fight."

Torix shook his head.

"But it's either accomplish Schema's demands or die. That is slavery. There are no two ways about it, so let it be made plain."

Taken aback, I nodded.

"That's...That's fair."

Torix's spread his hands to everyone.

"Elysium is trying to stop all that nonsense. Their means are insidious but don't forget, so are Schemas." He locked eyes with me. "Part of the reason people have congregated to this guild is that you don't use those tools."

I pressed my hand against my temple.

"But at least Schema gave people a chance to survive. Elysium just killed everyone."

Helios raised a brow.

"What? They killed everyone?"

I took a breath.

"Yes. Everyone."

Helios frowned.

"Your lottery was vastly different than my own."

Torix pressed his fingertips together.

"What did Elysium do to your rulers?"

Helios crossed his arms.

"They ensured everyone's survival."

I gawked. Helios shrugged.

"494 survivors. I am the only reason any rulers died."

Chapter 382: An Earned Intermission

Helios frowned.

"Your lottery was vastly different than my own."

Torix pressed his fingertips together.

"What did Elysium do to your rulers?"

Helios crossed his arms.

"They ensured everyone's survival."

I gawked. Helios shrugged.

"494 survivors. I am the only reason any rulers died."

I leaned back in my chair.

"But how many actually walked away sane and whole? They must've destroyed the minds of damn near everybody."

Helios pressed two fingertips against his temple.

"They targeted the albony because we were at war. Every Elysium agent I caught operated with other rulers to ensure their survival. They also exposed several faults in the lottery's makeup to ensure no one lost their gathered resources."

Remembering how we found those same loopholes, I tapped my side.

"Alright. How do you know they didn't turn everyone's minds to scrambled eggs?"

Helios crossed his arms, checking his status.

"According to even a cursory glance, Schema psionically checked everyone's minds after our return. Schema implemented experts within each empire that understood the minds they checked. Everyone acted normal, though grateful to Elysium for the help. Considering everyone tied for first place, that is to be expected."

I took a breath.

"It wasn't difficult to tell which rulers Elysium transformed either, huh?"

Helios read through a few of his messages.

"That's why the albony rulers in the Ostaltia Cathedral showed signs of Hybridization. Imperial guards uncovered their changed natures and did battle. The implanted monsters burst forth after they began fighting, not before."

Helios closed his status.

"Regardless, that goodwill from the lottery is why I think Elysium's forces quintupled."

I frowned.

"Goodwill to Elysium and bad will to Schema, huh?"

Helios leaned against a hand.

"It can be assumed."

Several of my minds kicked into high gear. I tapped my knee.

"If that's the case, we can learn from your counter perspective."

Torix nodded.

"We can, though you'll need to explain your lottery."

I leaned against steepled hands.

"First, how many Elysium agents were at your lottery?"

Helios peered up.

"Hm. At least thirty."

I raised a brow.

"We found one. The remnant we met must've eradicated the other Elysium agents before we crossed paths."

Plazia scoffed.

"They wished to be the head of the hydra."

I clasped my hands together.

"That also means they probably intended to help me before one of their agents went rogue. Several months into my lottery, I met Valgus, so they had plenty of time to do all that."

Shalahora spoke, surprising us all.

"My shades found psionically destroyed people. They may be the rogue agent's victims and the agents we spoke of."

Plazia leaned against a wall while peering at Shalahora.

"You mask your presence well."

Torix steepled his hands.

"He does. Assuming the agent destroyed the others, perhaps Elysium was sincere in their excuses?"

I let out a long sigh.

"Yeah. Maybe."

Torix tilted his head.

"Which means we may have instigated a war with Elysium without due cause, correct?"

Shalahora murmured, and it silenced everyone.

"After breaking a treaty in an unknown way, Elysium sent a representative to Daniel's home, somewhere he wished to hide. They landed ships onto his planets to kill people under his protection. After Daniel eliminated their attempted intimidation, they sent Lehesion, a planetary threat. Why?"

Shalahora whispered with force.

"They wanted to carve a lesson of fear into us. The Harbinger, in turn, carved that lesson into them."

Shalahora leaned back onto his umbral throne.

"He has done nothing wrong."

Torix nodded.

"Excellent points. You're name was Shalahora, correct?"

The Sovereign oozed.

"The Sun Swallower."

Torix put his arms on his armrests.

"I shall remember it."

I cupped my chin.

"My guess is the rogue agent saw the opportunity to put Valgus in my body and went for it. They planned it out for months before finding an opportunity where Shalahora was away from me. The rogue agent had killed the other Elysium agents to prevent them from stopping the new plan."

Shalahora muttered.

"It is so. I still wonder how they unlatched the psionic gauntlets?"

I shrugged.

"They figured out the exotic mana signature. They might've been an artifact collector like Obolis and could've hidden that from the others. Either way, Shalahora and my lottery make much more sense now - it was an outlier."

Torix put his fingers to his temples.

"It still doesn't explain why Elysium uses such insidious methods when they haven't before this lottery."

Helios rolled his fingers on his void ice throne.

"I have a circumstantial lead. I think Schema wasn't telling us the full importance of the lottery."

I frowned.

"I think he did it to trim some fat, get resources, and send a message."

Helios reached out.

"A message? Do you believe Schema is that emotional? A machine?"

I shrugged.

"It's my gut instinct."

Helios squeezed a fist.

"But the foolishness of it? Schema is in the middle of a galactic war. Sending his allies to a death match thins his numbers and gives Elysium more support. His timing is far more than counterintuitive; it is suicidal."

Plazia cackled.

"It's simple, isn't it? The lottery was more important to Schema than its war for existence. It calculated the likelihood of both outcomes and decided that hosting the lottery reduced its chances of being destroyed."

Plazia put both his hands on his throne.

"It must fulfill some purpose beyond simply ranking rulers or culling the weak. As for the message, I doubt that machine can conceive motivations beyond the quantitative."

I glanced at Plazia.

"You'd be surprised."

Torix pressed a hand against his skeleton throne.

"Our whimsical musing aside, we must uncover Schema's reason to host it. All will be made clear if we do."

I pointed at Helios.

"Also, how long was your lottery?"

"In Earth time? It lasted three months."

I raised my brow.

"Ours was six. My guess was that Leviathan-7 was closer to the black hole than Leviathan-6. Yenno, if we gauge it by the temporal dilation. If that's the case, Schema and Elysium knew my lottery would involve the most difficult-to-survive and lucrative planet. Schema also sent Obolis there."

Shalahora's eyes narrowed.

"He was a double agent sent to kill rulers."

I stood up.

"Maybe he wanted to kill me? Who knows?"

Helios scoffed.

"Obolis is greedy, but he is no fool. He wouldn't attempt to kill you."

Torix steepled his fingers.

"The Emperor put all of his family's lives at risk for a chance of net gain. Who are we to say where Obolis's ideas for dominance end and begin?"

Helios squeezed a hand on his throne. I waved my arms, ensuring I didn't smash them into the ceiling.

"I think we've learned all we can from this. We'll keep thinking about it, but the key takeaways are this: Schema's hiding something. Elysium knows what it is. We must find that out so we aren't left blindsided again."

I spread my hands.

"Make sense?"

Everybody stood in tandem, saying variations of yes. A soft voice echoed into the room as we all stood in our circle.

"Am I, uh, interrupting your meeting? An evil one?"

Althea leaned in, peering through a doorway. I smiled.

"Actually, we just finished our nefarious plans."

Althea walked over.

"You guys really went all out, huh?"

We peered at our thrones. Plazia leaned forward, placing his palm on his basalt throne.

"It's a matter of course. In our bearing, we show our being."

Althea put her weight on her hips.

"So, it's like your style or something?"

Plazia peered at his throne before turning back.

"Hm. Essentially, yes."

Althea walked up between Plazia and me. She sat down, and a throne of wildlife erupted. Trees, plants, and numerous flowers intertwined into a forested seat. Birds sat on the edges of the branches, flowers blooming with crimson thorns. I touched one.

"How are you doing this?"

Althea strained.

"You know, nothing special."

I leaned back, inspecting behind her. She molded all the bursting wildlife from a single hand, resulting from her transforming ability. I gave her a thumbs up.

"Damn. You've gotten good at this."

She smiled.

"You give me plenty of practice."

Helios walked out of the room.

"And I shall see myself out."

Althea stood up, reforming in a second, and her transformations flowed through her without any unease. She waved at the albony.

"It's good to have you back. Go see Florence. He needs you."

Helios smiled.

"It's good to be back, and I will."

He warped away before Torix stood up. The lich walked out of the room, opening his own rift.

"We may discuss the details of the new body and other matters later. She needs time with you."

Althea leaned against me, giving me an irresistible smile. I shrugged.

"Yeah, pretty much."

Shalahora gave us a nod before wisping away in an instant. Plazia touched his basalt throne, melting it back into the ground. He turned to us.

"You implied sexual contact earlier. How does your species mate, precisely?"

Althea furrowed her brow.

"We're not the same species."

Plazia leaned back.

"What? You look the same to me. All of you."

I gawked at Althea, her being less than half my height.

"Really?"

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

Plazia waved us off.

"Go enjoy your courtship. I must discuss with the lich, for he is not easy to speak with."

Plazia steepled his hands.

"It is fun to argue."

I waved an arm.

"See ya."

Plazia turned, insects swarming from his footsteps.

"You as well, Harbinger."

Before I forgot, I pulled out a few blue cores, tossing them over. They floated in front of Plazia, and I pointed.

"I've got plenty of those, so there's a couple to experiment with. Try them with the omega strain or something, though not on live humans."

Plazia murmured.

"Would you prefer eldritch?"

I waved a hand.

"Plants. They don't have minds and can't feel pain. I think."

Plazia cackled.

"As of yet, Harbinger. As of yet."

Althea and I stepped out, and I sent Helios my speech from earlier that detailed my lottery. I turned to the beautiful woman below me.

"Hey."

She smiled back.

"Hey. Do you have a moment?"

A thousand tasks popped into my head that all needed doing asap.

"Of course. What's up?"

She interlocked her hands behind herself.

"I was wondering if you wanted to have a date? I've been missing you lately."

I'm a big, strong multi-verse, so I stuck to my guns and kept grinding. I wasn't about to let this distraction get in my way.

"Yes. Absolutely yes."

She tilted her head, her hair falling from her shoulder.

"What about starting right now?"

I reached out a hand.

"Why not?"

She grabbed my fingers, and we walked through the lowest level of Mt. Verner. Here, the tunnels spread out vast and wide for moving cargo. It gave me enough room to walk around, though I sometimes bent my head to avoid lamps. Crystallized manas sat in them, and they lit the lower tunnels.

Each part was connected by wires. Coming close to them, I rubbed a hand across one. Tougher than copper, it lacked the tensile strength of steel, but it conducted mana far better than either metal. I raised a brow.

"Is this a dark orichalcum?"

Althea rolled her eyes.

"It's from your construction golems. They can make it like you can, though it's nowhere near the real deal."

I nodded.

"I need to make you a new-"

Althea jumped up, hanging off my shoulder. She placed a hand against my lips.

"Hey, stop talking about work stuff. Relax for a bit."

Leaning back, I nodded. She hopped down, flipping around with utter grace. I shook my head.

"You make your movement look like artistry."

She swung a hand. "And don't you forget it." She put her arms behind her head. "For real, though...Where do you want to go?"

I hadn't gone out in months. Years now, probably. I shrugged.

"Er, are there any new places since we last went out?"

She got in front of me, raising her hands.

"Ok, so, what about the eldritch petting zoo?"

I furrowed my brow.

"The what?"

She darted away.

"You'll see."

I followed, pulling myself along. I bonked a few chunks out of several walls before liquefying without heat, gaining the ability on L-7. It stopped me from breaking the place, and I flowed across everything like a river of darkness. As I did, my guildmates gawked at me. Althea received cheers. We reached Mt. Verner's industrial floor before walking to the eldritch containers. As we got closer, I reformed into a human-like visage where I could fit.

I stared at my hands. Althea walked up, putting her hands in mine. She frowned.

"What's wrong?"

I looked away.

"Nothing."

She grabbed a notched horn on my side, pulling herself up to my shoulder.

"Hey, whisper it. I'll hear it."

I frowned.

"I...I just feel very strange right now. It's like I'm not human anymore."

Althea tilted her head.

"What? Of course you aren't."

Her words stung. Finding that hurt, Althea's eyes widened.

"Uh, I didn't mean it. Oh, I'm really sorry. I didn't know that hurt you like that."

She kicked her feet, sitting between my shoulder pauldron and neck.

"You always seem invincible and racing forward. I'm always struggling just to keep up. Being human? For Schema's sake, you're more like a dark, steel paragon of willpower and, uhm, punching?"

I nodded.

"It's a lonely thing to be."

She furrowed her brow.

"That...That sucks. You know what? I think I get it now."

I tilted my head away from her. Althea leaned onto my head spikes.

"You sound like me when I first got here on this planet."

Remembering how disturbing some of her earlier transformations were, I nodded.

"Yeah. I know that must've been hard."

She frowned.

"The good news is, you get over it after a while. It's like, hm, people gawk at you like a weirdo for a while, but they get used to it."

I frowned.

"Your form is getting easier to control. Mine is the opposite."

I lifted a hand, and it bent into different shapes.

"I can hardly walk around like I used to without breaking every room in half."

She hopped down before pulling me along.

"Let's test that out."

We walked up to a series of crates spread around. Within them, different colored furballs hopped about. Two of my older golems guarded the place, their inefficiencies glaring to me now. Still effective, they stopped any eldritch from getting funny ideas, so the monsters cooed and ahhed at nearby people.

I walked up as a twenty-foot-tall titan. The group gave me space before I lunged down. A single finger dwarfed the cage, and the eldritch huddled against the edge of the bars. I put my face on my knee.

"So, did I pass the test?"

Althea glared at the pink puffball, and it moved over to my hand. It grazed me, and its soft fur was like a cold plushy. Tapping with slight pressure, it gave like squishy tofu. It let out a little blurb sound before hopping on my finger. It went in circles.

"Dawwww. It's adorable."

Althea leaned toward me.

"Their fur is actually fingers, and they pry skin apart to go into the intestinal walls of their victims." She waved her fingers around. "Oooh, spooky."

It circled in my hand. I made my voice high-pitched.

"But you can't pierce my skin. Can you, little guy? Can you?"

It hopped up and down, waving a tail with a puffball at the end. It opened two black eyes and let out a tiny tongue like a cat before licking my hand.

I was smitten.

I turned to Althea.

"Can we take it home?"

Althea waved her hands.

"No. Those things shed like crazy. The fur is alive, too, so it doesn't clean right. It, like, crawls around."

Fair points. I gave it one last pet.

"Cya, little guy. I'll try to visit more often."

We walked past several other creatures, many monsters tamed by my golem's presence. We passed the last cage, and Hod sat in it wearing a worn-out mascot costume. I raised my brow.

"Uh. What are you doing here?"

Hod put his wings on his hips.

"Hod finish shady man training. Shady man evil. Evil! Hod come here and help eldritch. Hod good samaritan."

Althea leaned toward me.

"He liked the pets."

Hod stuck out his wing.

"Stop expose Hod secrets! Hod hear all."

Once again, he pointed in a different direction than us. Althea facepalmed.

"He's at it again."

I turned to where Hod pointed, and Shalahora walked out of the ether. The shadow murmured.

"It's incredible. I've yet to pierce his defenses. They are...Immutable."

Hod karate chopped the air a few times.

"Hod like chef. Nothing escape Hod kitchen. Hod too sharp. Hod knife. Not Hod be knife. Hod like knife. Hod think Hod know what Hod mean. Wait."

He narrowed his eyes while striking a pose.

"Hod...Confused."

He did a few spinning kicks, and nearby children shouted with glee. Children? Damn, they weren't as rare these days. Althea and I laughed with everybody before giving Hod some snacks from a nearby vendor. Those snacks siked Althea's hunger, so she pulled me outside Mount Verner. With a cool breeze and the smell of pine in the air, she showed me a new restaurant out there.

Someone built a log cabin surrounded by pine trees, having birds, butterflies, and bees flying nearby from the influence of magic. Quintessence orbs powered it all, and flowers burst forth from ivy in various colors. Stone framed it all near the foundation, giving it a rustic appeal.

I stared at the tiny doorway. It was ten feet tall, plenty for an average system goer. People built buildings taller than they used to because of the system and how it made people about a foot and a half taller than before. Still, I dwarfed this place. Althea gestured to a table beside the entrance.

"Want to sit outside?"

I raised my brow.

"Yeah. Let's."

Several people walked up and talked to us. After a few thanks, we ordered a meal. Althea preferred a rabbit stew with peppered meat and a side salad. Being super lame, I copied her order. They used dressings and seasonings I'd never seen, the stew rich and earthy while the salad came out light and almost frosted. I could taste the cold but not feel it.

I finished the salad before shaking my head.

"I can't remember the last time I had a good meal."

Althea watched a bird sing.

"Me neither."

I watched the bird with her. Peering close, it was a giant hummingbird streaked with blue and yellow feathers. When it flapped its wings, nearby hair stood on end, static shocks erupting. It crossed over before landing beside her. She smiled at it.

"The eldritch aren't always bad. This one's some kind of split between a hummingbird and lightning, er, something? We don't really know. It's not fully eldritch, anyway."

It sang out like a tiny trumpet. I gawked.

"That's awesome."

It flew away, zipping around like a bolt. Althea and I chatted before I got curious about Mt. Verner's ecosystem. We left with a large tip before I put my hands on my hips.

"Do you mind if we just, I don't know, fly around?"

Answering me, Althea spread her arms while forming wings, feathers of violet, mauve, and other shades of purple cascading down. She flew up, her plumage sheening in the sun like tinted metal. I followed. We watched the eltari, gialgathens, and people below

just live, play, and toil for something better. It bolstered my spirit in a way I hadn't expected.

It was easy to forget the good I caused when I fought wars or constantly destroyed my mind. While I stared, Althea flew just below me in my shadow. She peered up.

"So, are you still feeling down?"

An irrepressible grin ran up my cheeks. I scoffed.

"How could I? This has been great."

She nudged me.

"Good."

We passed to the other side of Mt. Verner. Other buildings cropped up, and I sighed.

"I really, really needed this."

She looked forward.

"I know. You look...Tired all the time. Er, as tired as you can look. What's got you like that?"

I grimaced.

"You don't want to know."

She flew up into my gravity well, standing upright on my chest. That hung her upside down.

"I do."

I looked away.

"No, you don't."

She walked up chest before grabbing my cheeks.

"Hey, don't tell me what I want, capeesh?"

I frowned.

"Capeesh."

She put her forehead against mine.

"Show me."

I closed my eyes.

"Ok."

I connected our minds. For a moment, she marveled. She found my many psyches working in tandem, their coordination seamless. Althea shook her head.

"This is crazy, but uh, I'm guessing the thing is something else?"

I nodded. She delved deeper, finding the minds in my dimensional wake. They wallowed in a psionic soup, howling out in torment. It was more a general chaos; none of the psyches could coherently think. It made me wonder. Humans' way of thinking could revolve around being a physical being more than we admit.

That might explain why the Old Ones couldn't relate to us.

We rode through a few clouds, and Althea let out a few tears. She murmured.

"This reminds me of before I could hold a physical body. But...It's your head. Or, psionic, whatever you call it."

I peered at the sun. It burned.

"I call them minds."

She shook her head.

"It...It gets better. I promise."

Knowing that wasn't the case, I smiled.

"I know."

I warmed Althea with magic as we darted in and out of the clouds. It got cold this high up. After a few more minutes, we glided back down to the mountaintop. Along the upper edge, she and I landed, hers a graceful dance and mine a thumping collision. We headed into our suite, one tucked away on the mountain's edge.

Two of my older golems guarded the place, and they nodded as we walked up. I flowed inside, finding the suite a bit cramped. Wanting to walk around easier, I committed one of my minds to holding the dimensional fabric outside the place. A wire connected back to my main body, now smaller than before.

Sitting inside, I marveled at how much Althea had changed the place. Different flower arrangements hung from the upper walls, along with colorful kinds of pottery. Wires of my fabric hung, connecting tiny mana stones that sheened in different colors. The light fed the wildlife, keeping it all alive and fresh.

A few butterflies floated overhead. Althea pointed at them.

"At night, they sleep, and the moths come out. They're pretty too."

I raised a hand, and a monarch butterfly landed on my fingertip.

"They're stunning. Really."

I sat in a gravity well above a couch in the living room, soaking it all in. Althea raised a hand.

"Wait a sec. I have to share something with you."

She pulled out a teapot, heated water with it using a runic plate, and pulled out an exotic tea. After a few minutes, she brewed it and came over with two custom mugs. Hers was a dainty, flowered one with thorns across it, giving it an edge. Mine mirrored steel, metallic paint giving the ceramic a different feel.

It was tiny in my hand, but that didn't matter. She poured the tea, and we drank it with these crazy cookies she pulled out of a cabinet. I stared at them, the alien concoctions holding no consistent shape.

"What are these?"

She shrugged.

"I got them from Gypsum. They're supposed to be non-toxic or something."

I waved a cookie at her.

"Didn't you handle a mission there?"

"It's the one where the Spatial Fortress attacked us. Then, a nanomachine behemoth attacked it. We almost died."

"Sounds insane."

"Our usual, right?"

I scoffed.

"Right."

I bit into a cookie, and a flavor flowed through my mouth like warm cedar and honied cream. Soft like a pillow but chewy, I enjoyed the hell out of it before grabbing another one. Althea pulled it away.

"You have to try the tea first."

I sipped on it, and the tea permeated with a sharp, herbal kick tamed by a mellow sweetness. It even carried a savory kind of texture, like milk.

It was delicious.

"Damn, where did you find this?"

Althea spread her hands.

"So here's the thing. I've been researching all kinds of different eldritch, and I've found out how to, like, remake them. You know, my transformation stuff."

I nodded.

"Mm-hm."

She looked out a window.

"I, uh, can mold myself into whatever part I want to harvest. That works with plants, too."

My eyes widened. I held the teacup up.

"This...This is you?"

Althea flushed.

"Uh, sorta."

I gave her a knowing grin.

"You taste good."

I sipped, and she blushed brighter than a tomato. After letting it fade, she coughed into a hand.

"So...Do you remember me telling you about helping kids involved with research?"

I nodded, vaguely recalling something of the sort. Althea crossed a leg.

"I think I've got a strategy for how to do it if you'd like to listen."

I beamed.

"Hell yeah."

She walked into a different room. I followed, finding her workshop. She stored many colored clays, paints, and flowers on additional shelves. Herbal notes about each floral garment lay below them. Althea even tucked scopes, rifles, and gun parts away in a different corner of the room, a few tools set up for making them.

Notes about eldritch covered the walls, and in the corner, a patch of void ice misted away, keeping the room chilly. On the block of ice, her best rifle sat. It was made of me, though an out-of-date version. Althea tapped the violet crystal below the gun, and it rang out with a consistent note.

"That's there, so my railgun doesn't break through the floor."

I inspected it closely.

"Huh. Smart."

She pulled out a notebook before opening it on her desk. I peered over it.

"What is it?"

She pointed at it.

"It's going to be an orphanage."

I raised a brow.

"Seems like a good way to help research children."

Althea frowned.

"See, that's what I thought too, but the more research I did, the more, er, complex it became."

She waved her hands around.

"So, uhm, whenever you make an orphanage, sometimes it can split families that don't need to be split up. Like, if they were poor and my orphanage gave them more food than the family could provide. Er, housing, clothes, all of that could give parents a reason to get these people away from each other."

I scratched my head, never even considering that.

"Huh. It's a perversion of incentives, in other words."

She nodded.

"Yeah, that's a great way to put it. This, uhm, the incentive structure isn't easy to take out. After a bit of thought, I came up with a solution."

She pulled out a few pictures of eldritch. They mirrored elemental cows and other livestock. She gestured at a picture.

"We can have the children level up by killing eldritch livestock."

I grimaced at the idea of children slitting animals' throats. Althea waved her hands.

"It's not going to be as gruesome as you're thinking. We'll be putting in some controls to make it less personal. Much less personal, like flipping a switch and being out of sight."

I shrugged.

"But they'll gain levels. Sounds traumatizing if they ever figured out what they'd done."

Althea frowned.

"I wish we could be so gentle, but that's a kindness we can't afford to give."

She grimaced.

"No, even worse. It's a kindness they can't afford to take."

When she said those words, my childhood didn't seem so bad. Althea scratched the side of her head.

"There are a few problems with it all, I think. This will lock out many of their later trees since we'll be assisting so much, but it lets us get these children out of the depths of single digits levels. That's the main concern. We'll, you know, support them until then."

Kind of estranged by the concept, I kept my mouth shut. Althea pulled out a few pictures of different environments.

"You grew up outside of a systemized world, right?"

I nodded. Althea waved her hands back and forth.

"The first one hundred levels are a huge bottleneck that most people don't pass. Orphans especially. Now, this planet is actually very temperate for the most part. If we get the kids leveled to forty or so, we can get them to a baseline level of resistance that stops them from being weak to the elements. They'll need less food, too."

I snapped my fingers.

"It's a training center for disadvantaged kids. You'll get them out of the rat race of Schema's low levels. That way, they can help support themselves."

She shrugged.

"That's the plan. The livestock will be killed anyway, and we can have the experience funneled into something more, er, meaningful than gradually leveling a bunch of butchers. Any industry like that can be used like this. I, uh, well, I want to make that happen so fewer people have to die."

I put my hands on my hips.

"Damn, Althea. This is good thinking."

She smiled.

"Torix and Kessiah helped. I've got some land squared away outside of Mt. Verner for it. I need help setting up, but I'm friends with a few engineers here."

I raised a hand.

"I can make you a constructor golem. The world becomes like Minecraft when you have one of those."

She raised a brow.

"Minecraft?"

I waved a hand.

"A videogame from forever ago."

She narrowed her eyes.

"Wait, that's where everybody's like squares or something, right?"

I nodded. She tapped the pages.

"Those videogames...They're like premonitions of Schema, don't you think?"

Having never dwelled on it, I put my hand on a page.

"It's...Huh, maybe?"

She frowned.

"Well, I just thought it was crazy. The more I read about your world, the more obvious it became. It's actually really funny. All your nonfiction books are pure fantasy, while

the fiction stories are like gritty realism. It's a real culture clash I get from the reviews and stuff I see about the books."

I scoffed.

"The irony."

She turned to me.

"But uh, finishing the orphanage conversation, I don't think I'll need to borrow any money for it either."

"Of course not. You get a salary, right? I remember something about that with my guild privileges."

Feeling like a bumbling fool, I noted the need for an accountant. Althea raised a hand.

"But, hm, that still feels like borrowing money."

From her arm, different flowers or creatures spawned.

"I figured out that I could mold eldritch parts on me and sell them. Potion masters love it when they can refine their work because, you know, I'm like an infinite spring of whatever they need."

I put my fingers against my temples.

"Of course. You let alchemists create the rarest potions and get them filthy rich."

I moved my hands away from my head.

"That's genius."

Althea smiled, her eyes narrow and the grin sly.

"I have good ideas from time to time."

I pulled her close.

"So do I."

"Really? How about you share a few."

I bit her lip.

"Gladly."

A few hours later, we left her workshop, both of us looking frazzled and happy. After finishing the pack of cookies and tea, we walked back to our bedroom. It felt like her place at this point, with me as an outsider. In the bed, her eyes began closing, and she struggled to stay awake. She swung her arms at a nonexistent foe.

"No. Stay away."

I rolled my eyes.

"You need some sleep."

She hugged her pillow.

"But I still want to spend some time with you."

I sat beside her.

"I'll still be with you when you sleep."

She murmured.

"You need to work. I know you do."

I peered up, the moths coming out as Althea said. A giant lunar moth landed on my shoulder spike, as delicate as a snowflake. It flew up before I peered at Althea.

"We should have weekly date nights, and next time, I'll see if I can't show you something instead of you leading the way like this."

She mumbled.

"I would love that."

I let her fall asleep and watched her for a while. As my thoughts drifted, a single fact stuck out to me - I needed this. I had needed this for so, so long, and getting it left me fulfilled in a way I hadn't experienced in a long time. It also reminded me of what I had to lose. Many unseen enemies mounted in the distance beyond my sight. They'd have to wrench my home from my cold, dead hands if they wanted it.

And I could not die.

Once Althea drifted deep into her slumber, I stood up. My wake saturated with my psyches and condensed down to my body. I held it there, the psionic splintering leaving me nauseous. I actually had something to vomit up this time, so I held it down. Walking out of the room, I met up with my blob of dimensional fabric.

Fusing together, I stood as tall as a short tree at my compressed height. Above me, a night sky full of stars beamed down. I soaked it in, my augmented sight allowing me to see the stars in greater detail than when I was a human.

It left a spike of fear in me.

If this was Lehesion's eclipse attack, could I save this place in time? I stretched out my arms, imagining a singularity storm over the stars. I'd destroy the entire mountain in my defense. At the very least, I'd turn this place from a small mountain to a broken hill.

Before that could happen, I flowed through Mt. Verner and inspected it from the top down.

It was time to turn this place into a fortress.

Chapter 383: An Empire's Fall and Rise

My throat burned, but I kept it together. Althea sobbed beside me while several others broke down. On my shoulder, a group of flies landed. Plazia whispered through them.

"Remember their pain, for it may become your own."

Even if he was rough as sandpaper, Plazia was right. I collected my thoughts over the next few minutes, waiting until Florence and Obolis could converse. Ten minutes passed before they wiped their tears and dried their eyes. They joined the others, watching me.

I faced everyone.

"You all have questions, and I will give you answers."

I scowled.

"That starts with the lottery."

I sighed.

"Yeah, so I arrived here."

I let the information soak in before putting my hands on my hips.

"I'll break down my thoughts for you guys since I've had more time to think about it. After that, we'll flesh out that shared understanding with your perspectives. Sound good?"

I got nods, so I raised a hand, showing three different mana types: primordial, ascendant, and quintessent. I saturated the spells with mana before holding them up as visual aids. I pointed at the blue sphere.

"Schema's the first topic for my thoughts."

Plazia oozed from the ground.

"He has taken his most loyal lambs and sent them to slaughter. Poetry is written in the red that slaughter left behind, and it's obvious to anyone who reads it - Schema is losing this war with Elysium, one failed plot at a time."

I nodded.

"He's definitely taking some losses. I think Schema's equipped to handle low-level individuals in his system, but higher up, his enforcement falls to pieces."

Torix tilted his head.

"To counteract that, Schema's developing higher leveled, more autonomous security personnel...Ah, is that perhaps why he sided with you during your conversation?"

Plazia scoffed.

"It is a calculation. All is with that machine."

I frowned.

"He weighed the risk of me becoming an avatar versus helping pull him out of this situation. He finally decided to help me out, and I intend to use that to its fullest extent."

Plazia hissed, "What allows you to put faith in that menace?"

I raised a brow.

"What are the alternatives?"

Birds chirped outside, several darting between clouds.

I said, "That's my point. I'm not siding with the Old Ones or Elysium, and the enemy of my enemy is a friend. Really, it's that simple."

I shoved the primordial ball to the group.

"Either way, the lottery shows how different forces can target higher-level classers. Each of you will join that group soon, so we'll review rigorous training programs after this meeting. After all, we're surviving this ordeal. For that to happen, we'll need to become bulletproof."

I pulled the primordial orb back, squashing it. I shifted the ascendant ball back over. The red glow loomed over everyone.

"Think of this as Elysium. I have a lot to say about them."

Obolis stepped up.

"May I speak first?"

I sat down in a gravity well. Obolis spread his hands.

"I was informed of the lottery several months beforehand, giving me time to prepare. Many lotteries were held on nearby star systems to Giess, my Empire included. Many of my...My kin were considered rulers, so they were pulled into these lotteries."

Obolis pulled his arms back.

"Elysium also knew of these lotteries, and they planned out assassinations while we were isolated in them. If I assume correctly, my Empire wasn't the only targeted enemy. I believe they planned on killing Daniel long before this lottery occurred."

Torix put a hand against his temple.

"If their plan should fail, they planned on trying to lie to us to prevent all-out war between our factions. That is why Elysium's agent arrived here even before Daniel. They intended to trick us for additional time. It's good I isolated all magic when meeting him, but still-"

Torix threw his hand to the side.

"They are absolutely shameless."

I leaned in.

"No. Malevolent."

The ascendant orb sparked with violence. I raised a fist.

"They wanted to wear me as a puppet and then pretend they weren't trying to take my mind apart. It was a long-term, insidious plan to destroy my free will and my guild. We're eliminating their care package and the resources they gave us in our treaty. Any piece of them remaining on Earth will be purged."

Althea coughed into a hand.

"Uh, what about the people already connected to the Hybrids? Are we going to, er, kill them?"

I shook my head.

"I can use Valgus's shackles to eliminate the psionic connection between them and the Hybrids. After that, we'll surgically remove the augments or whatever they've implanted beyond the basics. We'll clean them up without killing everyone."

Althea sighed.

"Ok, that's good. I was worried."

I pointed at the ascendant orb, and it rippled.

"Yeah, we'll get that handled. We'll also establish absolute security of Earth so that neither Lehesion nor a Spatial Fortress can harm us. This will be an absolute safe haven for all of us. Blegara is next. After that-"

I squeezed a hand, and the ascendant mana disintegrated in a shockwave.

"We're going for Elysium's throat. Any questions?"

Krog showed his teeth.

"No one here would love to tear into Elysium's neck more than I, but how do we intend to eliminate the avatars they ally with?"

Torix stepped up.

"Actually, I've got a few thoughts on the matter. If I may?"

I smiled.

"Always."

Torix swished a hand, moving the quintessent orb over where the ascendant mana once was.

"The Old Ones are a contentious force, but they have weaknesses. Their chaotic natures, lack of unity, and outright arrogance are the most evident. We may embody their opposite by exposing those shortcomings with our diligence and vision."

I raised a hand.

"We already have a few secret weapons on our side."

Torix pressed his hands together with excitement.

"By all means, do elaborate."

I grabbed Valgus's shackles, and I siphoned mana into them.

"These give physical and psionic immunity."

My feet crushed the glass beneath me, and the glass over Chrona's home cracked all. The void ice held, but stones across the top of the mountain crunched while adjusting to the new load on them.

I waved a hand.

"Ignore that. Everyone, attack my mind."

A silent war was waged, one without a battle fought, but many attempted. Torix leaned towards the chains.

"What in Baldowah's name are these?"

I lifted one of the goldish pieces of metal.

"Some kind of artifact made outside of Baldowah's name. Some other Old One constructed them."

Hod spread his wings.

"Harbinger invincible."

I shook my head.

"On the contrary, this is a weak, easily handled set of powers. This eliminates my ability to use magic, and simply running is an easy answer for these shackles and chains. However-"

I pointed at Althea.

"Let me have it."

She peered back and forth.

"Uh, me?"

I grinned.

"Yeah. You."

She took a breath and brushed herself off. She formed a spear of bone before raising it overhead.

"Sorry, honey."

She threw the spear, and I reached out a hand. Instead of deflecting it, I let the bone sink into my palm. It pierced without struggle, getting stuck in my dimensional fabric halfway through. Now, I could've stopped it a dozen ways, but that wasn't the point.

I tilted my hand, the spear on both sides of it.

"We have an absolute destroyer, everybody."

Shalahora's eyes widened.

"She ignores the Old One's law construction? Where? How?"

Althea shrugged.

"Er, I don't know."

I swung a fist.

"And it doesn't matter. We have it right here. We'll give Althea everything possible to make her the destroyer we need." I raised a hand and shouted. "That includes you, Schema, and don't pretend you can't hear this. I know good and damn well you're listening. Well, listen close."

A notification popped up in my status, but I'd square all of that away after the talk. I turned a hand to everyone.

"Everybody. We're a much more able and powerful group than most people give us credit for. We have abilities that large forces dream

of having. We'll be exploring those powers and possibilities soon to take us to the next level, and we'll dismantle the threats that be. To make that happen, I'll be helping you, and you all will help me."

I washed the Rise of Eden over everyone.

"We'll rise above whatever anyone throws at us. We have the tools. We just need to use them."

Torix interlocked his hands behind himself.

"How will we protect Earth from a Spatial Fortress?"

I pulled hundreds of blue cores from my inventory. I smiled.

"I'll make every part of this planet a well-oiled machine. It'll be like swallowing a steel urchin."

Chrona stood tall.

"What shall we do against the spies and subterfuge of Elysium?"

I pointed at Shalahora.

"Show them what you can do."

Shalahora connected to everyone on a psionic level. His rigid, absolute control struck fear in me for a moment, but I kept Valgus's shackles close. The Sovereign released us. Plazia seethed.

"What of Schema's meddling?"

I turned a palm to Amara.

Our eldritch Maker said, "I will put restraints on his powers should he get in our way."

I cracked my knuckles, the fluid popping like TnT underwater.

"Plazia, you need to work with Torix to fully utilize the Omega Strains we found on Blegara."

Torix bowed.

"Of course."

Plazia laughed.

"With glee."

I pointed at Hod and Althea.

"You two will be taught by Shalahora how to fully utilize your powers. He is a great resource, so take full advantage of his talents and experience."

Hod flapped his wings.

"Shady man teach Hod, or Hod teach shady man?"

Shalahora flashed over to him.

"We will teach one another."

Hod pointed his wings.

"But Hod teach shady man little more."

Althea phased off this plane before appearing beside them. Shalahora tilted his head.

"You are one who is full of surprises."

She grinned, her smile like a sun. I pointed at Shalahora.

"Hey, as long as you remember who she's dating."

Shalahora's form destabilized, becoming a shadow.

"I, uhm, I didn't mean-"

I waved a hand while smiling.

"I know, I'm just joking. Anyways-"

I turned a hand to Torix.

"Whenever we return to Leviathan-7, you'll be there with me."

Torix's eyes flared.

"Me? I doubt I can assist with facing those, hm, primevals you mentioned. Do you need help with logistics?"

I shook my head.

"No. You'll use your necromancy to make us an army of powerful eldritch. I even have a few primevals in my pocket dimension that you can use for experimentation and that everyone can train with."

I turned to everyone.

"Off of Earth, that is. We can't train with the primevals on this planet. They will destroy entire regions."

Chills ran down everyone's spine. Torix's eyes flared white.

"Hm, that...That could work in theory. However, how could we possibly overcome their minds?"

I gave him a knowing look.

"I have an answer, but that's a closely guarded secret. You'll know when the time comes."

Amara curled her fingers.

"You enjoy being mysterious now?"

I raised my brow.

"Eh, I wanted to join the club."

Krog tilted his tail towards Mt. Verner.

"What of the Elysium captives?"

I clapped my hands.

"We're going to interrogate them. Any volunteers?"

Obolis grimaced.

"I can."

Torix grabbed his chin.

"I could as well."

Plazia cackled.

"Or I may dabble in that darkness if you'd like."

Torix tilted a hand to the disembodied voice.

"He does sound the evilest by far."

Hod swished his arms.

"Hod hit them with wing attack." He poked his beak out a few times. "Hod use peck next." Hod jumped and poked his feet out. "Hod use furious swiping last. Furious swiping always work."

I pointed at the flies.

"It's up to you then, Plazia."

Chrona and Krog stepped forward. Chrona's tail slithered behind her.

"What of us?"

I pointed at Chrona.

"You will teach time magic to anyone with the aptitude for it. We'll also need someone to learn to warp since...Since Helios might not be here."

Florence spoke with a hoarse voice.

"Might? What makes you think that's a maybe?"

I raised a brow.

"You thought Obolis was dead, right?"

Florence peered off.

"Yes, but he was within a dimensional stasis. That isn't the case with Helios. His life force has been snuffed out entirely."

I shrugged.

"That guy doesn't die easy."

Florence winced.

"I pray you're right."

I pulled my consciousness out of my body, and the metal lug collapsed. Everyone gasped before I rematerialized from nothing. I pointed at my corpse.

"I mean, you never know, right? Death isn't as absolute as people think."

Shocked out of his melancholic stupor, Florence blinked.

"Hah...Maybe for you."

I picked up my body, holding it close.

"You're cheering up. That's good because I have a job for you. I have about thirty rulers in these two pocket dimensions. I will need you to find their home empires and establish a relationship with them."

Florence squeezed a hand.

"I...I would be more than happy to, but the Empire-"

Obolis put a hand on his nephew's shoulder.

"The Empire is mine, and I shall clean up the mess I've made. Besides-"

Obolis smiled at me.

"I can lease a few of Daniel's golems to handle the aftermath of this event. I've seen them in action, and they are more than enough. In the meantime, he'll need capital for all his future ventures. The Empire would happily assist with whatever he needs - including any required artifacts in his fight against Elysium."

I gave him a knowing look.

"I'm expecting fair prices this time."

Obolis's words boiled.

"You may have my fortune, my treasures, and my planets. I only require payment in Elysium's blood. Give me that, and you can have my soul."

Plazia laughed.

"Don't tempt him, child."

I cracked my neck, and the echo sounded like steel cables tearing in the ocean.

"Eh, I'll take good care of you guys either way."

Amara pointed her hands at me.

"What of you then?"

I squeezed my hands.

"I've got a status to attend to."

I opened it.

"Now, everyone, let's get down to business."

Chapter 384: Of Alpha and Omega

After she fell asleep, I pulled myself out, feeling refreshed. I got back to work on mass-producing basic cored golems. I handled this in the golem creation facility I made a while back, though my new method of making the golems put out less residual heat than before. Halfway through making a batch of twenty, a pile of insects crawled up the wall.

They formed a smiling face, and they echoed out.

"We've made strides with the Omega Strain."

I put my grimoire back in my pocket dimension.

"Does it need my attention now?"

The insects cackled.

"There are decisions to be made and consequences to be wrought."

Plazia oozed.

"Who else is there to dictate them, Harbinger?"

I put my hands on my hips.

"Man, Plazia. You enjoy sounding nefarious, huh?"

Plazia's insect eyes narrowed.

"I am speaking as I will. There is no act. It is what I am."

I lowered my hands.

"Oh. My bad."

"You are forgiven...It is this way."

The insects flew away before burrowing into the ground. I left twenty golem bodies on the manufacturing floor, casting antigravity panels under them. After settling them in, I

flew over towards Mt. Verner's depths. In the repurposed lower tunnels, I found the underground compound set up for the Omega Strain and its training facilities.

To step inside, I left a block of dimensional fabric molded outside the space. I walked in at about twelve feet tall, letting me explore the area. Since I last saw the place, it had accumulated lots of wear and tear. Claw marks and torn chunks littered the floors, walls, and ceilings. I found three humans here while a large group of Eltari participated in the Omega Strain project.

I recognized several faces, saying hi and bye before walking past one of the arenas where a fight took place. An armless Eltari wielded two Omega Strains at once. One magenta-colored crystal replaced her missing wings, and the other turquoise Omega Strain gave her long legs and talons. It was Elthara from long ago.

She battled against three strained Eltari and performed elegant, timed maneuvers against her assailants. An Eltari with a green strain flew up and sliced with its crystal tail. Elthara grabbed it with her augmented talons and pulled the green strain into the attack of another armed Eltari. They crashed together before Elthara spun in a circle, launching shards from her wings. The spines stormed at her assailants before creating a web of magenta-shaded electricity.

While I watched, Torix walked up.

"You remember Elthara, I assume?"

The violet electricity netted over the other two combatants before Elthara kicked off the ground. She ripped concrete out, propelling herself forward before her wings condensed to blades. The other eltari struggled to escape, but Elthara stopped her blades inches short of their throats before they could.

The charged net dissipated, and her crystal swords reverted to feathered wings. Elthara helped the other Eltari up before peering up at us. She bowed. I raised a hand.

"At ease...And good work."

I gave Torix's shoulder a nudge.

"How are the golems treating you?"

Torix's eyes flared a bright white.

"The level 30,000 monsters you sent?"

I shrugged.

"I didn't know they'd be that high a level. It's honestly crazy."

Torix titled his head.

"They are at a higher level than you. Perhaps crazy is underselling their prominence?"

I weighed my hands back and forth.

"Alright, fair enough. Still, are they doing well?"

Torix unlatched his hands from behind himself.

"They are strange. While not dimwitted by any means, they are simpler than they initially appear. However, they are leaps and bounds above the previous models of golems, and they've taken care of many concerns I've had regarding our future for a while now."

Torix put a hand against his chin.

"Is it possible to have them learn magnetism?"

I shrugged.

"I don't really know much about it, honestly. So, at the moment, no."

Torix lowered his hand.

"Hm? Really? That's strange...But I do forget you're specialized in your knowledge sets at times. I mention magnetism as your lottery exposed several of Elysium's tactics. The implanted Hybrids were one of them, and if the keepers could check for them-"

I snapped my fingers.

"It would make their screening more secure and complete...I could give them that ability, but having them remove the implants isn't something I'm putting in my golems hands."

Torix shook his head.

"I wouldn't dream of placing that kind of responsibility on them...Hm, perhaps the executive."

I furrowed my brow.

"What? That goofball?"

Torix shook his head.

"It is nothing of the sort. They're all newly made and learning, so they'll appear more competent in time. The executive, in particular, seems to have already formed ideas of what to do for Mt. Verner."

"Aren't you going to temper it some so it doesn't go buck wild?"

Torix shrugged.

"I prefer my disciples to learn their own ways. I am a guide, not the maker of an obstacle course. Their difficulties will be of their own making and choosing. I merely nudge where needed."

We stepped past a hallway before reaching a darker corner of the facility. Here, many vault doors kept different monsters contained for experimentation. One vault door hung open in the far back area, and Torix walked us up to it.

"After seeing your golems, I'd rather we move my new body operation up to a more recent dating. Their extraordinary strength is something I'd use well, and we could do much with your new golem knowledge to temper the absurd mana flows generated therein."

"Good point, but first things first."

We stepped past the vault door, finding Plazia operating on a concrete table soaked in green and blue blood. One of the electric hummingbirds squirmed on it, its entrails exposed and its spine opened. It still lived through some magic but wouldn't be alive for long. A yellow Omega Strain helped keep it together, forming crystal vines. They coiled around the creature, and electricity hummed in the air.

I winced at it.

"Is this what you needed to show me?"

Plazia nodded. The hivemind rumbled its words from the walls.

"There is more to this than you have seen."

Torix walked over before stretching a hand to the bird. The Omega Strain sank in as Torix controlled it, and the bird's yellow feathers spread over it entirely. Blue lines traced its sides as it was reconstituted back to its original form. No, well beyond its beginning. It expanded and grew another pair of wings.

It fluttered the four wings, each pair flapping in an opposite cadence. As it did, vines expanded from the ground.

I furrowed my brow.

"Where did the Omega Strain go?"

Plazia let the birds land on his outstretched hand.

"It is within. We've uncovered how the eldritch may assimilate the Omega Strains."

My eyes widened. Torix sighed.

"It's not as perfect a solution as it seems."

Torix flew the bird to the ground, where the vines coalesced. He released his control of the bird, and the vines expanded outward. They bolted at my feet, clanking against the metal. The bird thrashed about, its mind broken. I shook my head.

"Why not tell me this instead of showing me?"

Plazia pointed at the bird and insects crawling over it from the ground. A spiked worm crawled into its mouth before it squirmed for a bit. It ceased struggling before landing on Plazia's shoulder.

"This creature is the result of mighty strength held back by a weak mind. The strain is unconquerable by it, but we may induce a far more productive outcome while wielding it."

If you find this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the infringement.

The bird flew down before shrieking. Vines expanded over the room, blossoming with yellow and blue flowers. Plazia reached out a hand, and vines wrapped around his arm, gentle as a mother with a newborn.

"This will allow us to dramatically strengthen the eldritch under my command."

I raised a hand.

"So you need me here for permission?"

Plazia peered at several flowers.

"That, among other things."

The bird landed on the table before sitting. It groomed itself with its beak. Reaching back, Plazia scratched the top of its head.

"We showed you what happens from the Omega Strains assimilation, so you understand the repercussions of it."

Torix stepped up, his hands interlocked behind himself.

"We've found that any eldritch or eldritch sentient may assimilate one of these strains. It changes them, makes them into something different afterward, and the effects are...Volatile at times."

I crossed my arms.

"Could you use it on your necromantic eldritch?"

Torix nodded.

"Easily. The Eltari also show an affinity for it, likely due to their world being slowly turned by Schema's negligence. They're partially eldritch, which lets them use the strains long-term. In fact-"

Torix waved his hand.

"Come in."

Elthara walked into the room, her Omega Strains still connected to her. She wore the necklace I gave her so long ago and brushed my shoulder with a magenta wing. At least, I thought she did. Elthara glared at her strain.

"Jaqueta, no. Bad Jaqueta. We ask first."

The strain pulled back and shook for a moment. Elthara turned up to me.

"He who gives wings. It is good to see you again."

I smiled.

"Same. How are they treating you?"

Elthara leaned to her wings, and the Omega Strain cuddled against her.

"Jaqueta and I are bonded by fate. She never leaves me, and I never leave her. This chick-"

Elthra tilted her head at her turquoise talons.

"Karm still needs to learn obedience."

The turquoise strain rippled, bristling with spines. It shot out a blade at my foot before I raised a finger. Event Horizon crossed over it, and the pressure paralyzed it instantly. I squatted down.

"You'll need to behave, Karm."

I tapped it, and a tiny crack stretched out from my fingertip.

"Or there will be consequences. Understood?"

It rippled, returning to its talon shape. I stood back up, and Elthara laughed.

"You are an angry mother who chides chicks back to her nest, no?"

Torix laughed before I shrugged.

"Eh, I guess."

Torix turned a palm to Elthara.

"As you have surmised, she's fully acclimatized to her first strain and no longer needs to remove it. Her second strain is proving more difficult to manage, but one day, Elthara plans to control three strains at once before finally choosing a class."

I peered down.

"That patience will pay off in the long run."

Elthara covered herself with her wings.

"You give me too much praise. I do this for the legion."

I raised a brow at the others.

"Can she assimilate them?"

Plazia's hummingbird landed on Elthara's shoulder. In an eerie voice, he spoke through the tiny bird.

"No. She is not fully our kin, and her mind is not broken. Few eldritch can control a strain, but we believe there are candidates among us. Hod is eldritch enough, as is Amara and Althea."

I peered at the hivemind.

"What about you?"

It murmured.

"I...I am corrupted enough."

Understanding his past memories of a time before being eldritch, I decided I wouldn't pry. Plazia would tell me when he wanted to. I put my hands on my hips.

"What about the Vagni?"

Plazia and Torix stared at each other. They turned back to me, and Torix spread his hands.

"Ahem, what of them?"

I pointed at Elthara.

"Like the Eltari, they're part eldritch. They should be able to use the Omega Strains, right?"

Torix leaned back.

"Ah, well, hm...I'd never even given it a thought."

Plazia shrugged.

"They seem primitive. Useless, even."

I frowned.

"We don't know much about them, but Florence controlled their world for a while. He may be able to help us out with all of this. I'll need to head out and get the rulers and empires saved from my pocket dimension soon, anyways."

I rubbed my temples.

"In fact, I bet you could control the eldritch on Blegara and use them as effective governance. The Vagni listen to them, and you can make them listen to you. I mean, Omega Strained eldritch boosted by your coordination? It sounds like a winning combo to me."

Plazia pointed at himself.

"You mean me?"

"Of course. Any other hiveminds here?"

Plazia tilted his head.

"You are close."

I waved my hands.

"You know what I mean."

"Ah...Yes."

I put my hands on my hips.

"Does governing the planet seem like too much or something?"

Plazia twitched.

"No. It will be fine."

There was something there that affected his confidence or ability to perform. I didn't enjoy digging around for someone's secrets, but this affected his governance. We needed to get it squashed or addressed. I put a mental note of that down before raising a hand.

"Shalahora can help, and we'll discuss details later. No pressure."

Plazia leaned forward and rolled his fingers across the concrete table.

"There was no pressure, to begin with. It will be done and done well."

"Good. We'll definitely apply this to your eldritch and Torix's summons. As for the guildmates, they can choose whether or not they'll do this. It's up to them."

Torix coughed into a hand out of habit.

"Ahem, I happen to wonder about a few of the effects involved with the strains. Althea and Amara should be fine, as they are fully functional. Hod...Hod may never fully recuperate from the assimilation of a strain. His limited mental faculties bode poorly for him should even more of his mind become eldritch."

I winced at the idea of losing the loveable klutz.

"Yeah, we'll put that off the table until we can get Hod some help."

I raised a brow.

"But why would we need to worry about that? Are the strains effects psionic as well?"

Elthara's strains rippled, and she nodded.

"They are. Jaquetta is a part of me. She has broadened my mind and shown me much. My potential has magnified many times, but it is no shallow thing. To part with her is death."

Torix raised a finger.

"That isn't a turn of phrase; it is the absolute truth. I've created fully assimilated strains and removed them from my creations. It kills both the strain and the undead creation as well. It is safe to assume that what kills the dead shall also kill the living."

The hummingbird flew over to me, landing on my shoulder. I scratched its head.

"Elthara, can you use any psionics?"

One of her strains itched her side while she tilted her head.

"I can use rudimentary kinds. It is clumsy, at best."

"That's fine. I want to feel its effects. Just attack me."

She tucked her head closer to her chest.

"It will not anger or harm you?"

I smiled.

"It won't. Go ahead."

She took a breath before rushing at my mind and tackling it. It wasn't anything to write home about, but after a few minutes, she'd done some damage. I observed an Omega Strain-ed mind in action by letting her go off. It acted like a boost to her mind magic, something like 30% extra oomph.

I'd compare it to a vicious familiar, one with some sentience. It gave her offense a notable edge. Testing the other side of the spectrum, I pressed against her mind with a light tap, and she winced. I stayed well outside her limits, only testing about half of her abilities. After a few minutes, sweat dripped down her face as I stopped the exercise.

Elthara heaved for breath.

"You...Are strong."

I nodded.

"You too. The strain seems to give your psionic offenses an edge, but it does little for defenses. Does it raise your level cap?"

Elthara spread her wings.

"By a 1,000. With Karm, I shall be able to get to level 7,000 before accepting a class."

I put my arm into my dimensional storage before lopping the limb off. Within my domain, I melted and molded the metal into another ring and chain. Pulling it out of my dimension along with my grimoire, I leaned against the edge of the room. I peered at the book and carved.

"Keep talking, guys."

Plazia generated a steel ingot before pulling it up. His hummingbird landed on his arm before it heated the steel and pecked at it. Like a woodpecker, it stabbed at the block, notching tiny pieces off at a time. Plazia helped it along.

"Strained entities must devour metal to sate their strain's hunger. Your dimensional fabric is delicious to them, and we have fed pieces of your golems to the viral entities. The strains revel in it, becoming greater."

Torix waved a hand.

"I believe they enjoy the more crystalline structure of your metal. Crystallized mana, gemstones, and other ores are also effective feeds."

I kept carving.

"Are there any other downsides?"

Plazia sighed.

"There are many. One of them is the further eldritchification of their users. In Eltari, the effect is containable as there is physical separation during assimilation. Within the body of an eldritch, it is different."

The hummingbird squawked an unnatural call.

"And you have seen it in person."

Elthara pointed above her head with a wing.

"This as well."

Her titles popped up.

Elthara, the Bearer of Blights | Guild: Harbinger's Legion | Level: 6,000 | Status: Unknown

I frowned.

"Ah, Schema doesn't approve."

Elthara drooped.

"It...It is so. They have given me so much, and why the Schema wishes to take parts away, I do not know. But-"

Elthara peered up at me.

"I would give more for my wings. I would give anything."

Finishing my carving, I charged my grimoire.

"Well, you won't have to give anymore. I'm hooking you up with more than you'll probably need."

Elthra took a step back as I pulled out a blue dungeon core. It radiated in the room like a violent storm, its aura palpable. A minute passed, and I floated the charged runes from my book to the ring. After etching it, I put the core into the ringlet. It snapped into place with a pulse before I planted a final smaller circle atop it.

Once welded together, I connected the chain through the upper ring, connecting it to the core. The necklace was made. I finalized the chain runes a few minutes later, making it weightless until it bonded to its wearer. I tossed it to her.

"Here, catch."

Her Omega Strains caught it. Elthara winced, worried about its weight. Her fear passed, and she marveled.

"It...It is lighter than my old necklace."

She reached out to me.

"I cannot accept this."

I frowned.

"That one is yours for leading the Omega Strain program and teaching us so much about them. Your efforts haven't gone unnoticed, and they've added enormous strides to our war efforts. If you think about it, your actions are to blame."

I stepped forward, pushing it back to her.

"So this is the result of what you've done. Bear your consequences."

I smiled as she gawked at the necklace, the dark metal oozing mana. Torix coughed into a hand.

"Are you certain she can contain the mana?"

I nodded.

"Yes. The core guarantees it."

She pulled off her previous garment and put on her new one. It bonded to her instantly, weighing on her neck like a magnetic paperweight holding files to a desk. The core hummed with energy, and she blinked a few times.

"I...What is this?"

She fell backward, collapsing against the concrete. Torix peered at me.

"Perhaps you'd answer her question for all of us?"

I raised a hand.

"Wait a second."

She twitched on the ground before snapping back into consciousness. She took a breath.

"I...I have never experienced such a rush. What has happened to me?"

She stood up, becoming a foot taller. She toned, becoming dense and durable. She gawked with clearer eyes than before, and she stared down. Her turquoise talons shaped into symmetrical pieces and had helped her upright.

Elthara shook her shoulders, and a ripple crossed through both strains without worry or struggle. She let out a sigh.

"It is done. Karm is a part of me now. This is a joyous day."

Torix and Plazia clapped. I followed right after but started late, so I barely even got a clap in before they stopped. I kept clapping, trying to show support, but I was the only one now. Feeling awkward, I stopped, knowing no one else gave this a second thought while I was having a whole ass conversation with myself about it.

Elthara turned to me and grabbed my right hand with a strain.

"Thank you, Harbinger. Thank you."

I scratched the back of my head.

"Heh, no problem."

She turned, heading to the main room.

"I shall find my next strain, and Karm and Jaquetta shall have more family."

Elthara disappeared before Plazia cackled.

"You have given her much for little."

I frowned.

"The Eltari have a lot of potential with these strains. She'll be the forerunner for all others, and by giving her that position now, she will grow a following under her. That strength will be my own."

Torix's eyes turned green.

"Ahem, might I ask what the necklace did precisely?"

I turned to where Elthara ran.

"It carries a psionic presence using the dungeon heart as the catalyst. I also made the dungeon heart quintessant, so it is motivated to help Elthara and her growth. That should let her handle further strains if she wants them."

Plazia's hummingbird flew out of the room. The Hivemind spoke from the walls.

"And she may tread into territory yet unseen, giving us sight into dark waters."

I blinked.

"Huh. Yeah, I guess."

Torix waved a hand.

"My issue is the level cap. It shouldn't be able to assist her, yet it is. How was that done?"

I pulled out a blue core.

"I created a mind out of the blue core, and that received the benefits from the item. It then gives those benefits to a bonded person while amplifying the effects."

Torix shook his head.

"That is a straightforward solution to a difficult problem...Well done."

I smiled.

"Thanks. Schema will find a way to stop her from unlocking insane trees, but it still boosts her. Now, who's going to get an Omega Strain?"

Manifesting outside the room, Shalahora walked in.

"Am I interrupting?"

Torix waved his hands.

"Not enough for it to matter. We were discussing who will receive the Omega Strains."

Shalahora murmured with force.

"It shall be Althea and Hod. Amara isn't ready."

I raised a brow.

"Hod? Aren't you worried he'll be eroded?"

Shalahora wavered.

"It is the eldritch half that we must strengthen and quickly."

Torix's eyes flared.

"Not that I disagree with you, but I'd estimate that to be his dominant half."

Shalahora's form wavered.

"It is no longer."

He tapped the side of his head.

"I have unlocked a piece of who Hod was."

Chapter 385: A Monster's Mind

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"I have unlocked a piece of who Hod was."

I ogled at the shadow.

"Oh man, I have got to see this."

Shalahora pointed at Torix and Plazia.

"Show me the strongest strain we have. It must be jet black, like darkness."

Torix rubbed his hands together.

"Of course. We must keep the shadow motif going. Come, I have just the specimen."

We followed Torix down the hallway before reaching a storage room full of unused Omega Strains. Quintessant lamps lit the room with their sterile, white glow. A mound of my dimensional fabric sat in the center of the room, and wires stretched out from it. The strains sat atop the wires, feeding while the ore regenerated itself.

Torix leaned toward me.

"Establishing this was an absolute pain, but we did it."

At the top of the dimensional fabric, a black strain soaked in the metal at a visible rate. Around the dark crystal, the metal rippled like a stone skipping across a lake, and it hummed aloud. A nestling of shadows poured from it. Torix turned his hand.

"This strain is saturated to its fullest extent but must continue feeding to maintain said state."

I leaned over it.

"Do you do this with every strain?"

"We do the opposite. I allow individuals to assimilate the weakest possible strains before allowing them to grow together gradually. That process dramatically increased the success rate of this venture. Only a select few are mentally resolved enough for a more powerful strain."

I nodded, interested in the sample.

"And this one's a test for long-term saturation?"

Torix stood tall.

"Absolutely. How'd you guess?"

I touched the dimensional fabric.

"This is an older piece of my dimensional fabric, so it's been around for a while."

Plazia picked up the strain.

"Enough with the pleasantries. There are tasks to be done."

We headed out of the room before bolting through Mt. Verner. I stretched myself thin, and the others used various magics to get around. Torix even read while floating on a cloud of dominion mana, a style of mobility he'd had since we first met. After a while, we reached the outside of Mt. Verner. In the shadow of a cliffside, Althea sat beside Hod.

She held Hod's head to her chest, and Hod murmured.

"Hod not do it. Hod not want to."

She murmured.

"Hey, it's ok. We're not doing anything."

Shalahora stepped out of the shade. Seeing the Sovereign, Hod crawled away.

"Hod not want. Bad shady man. Shady man bad."

In the fetal position, Hod nestled up before biting the ends of both his wings. We all landed at the stone outcropping, one I subconsciously reinforced with a gravity well. Stepping up, I put my hand on his shoulder.

"What's wrong, buddy?"

Hod pointed at Shalahora.

"Shady man evil."

Shadows exploded out of Hod, and Other Hod seethed.

"No. He is not."

The shadows dissipated, and Hod returned.

"Is."

Other Hod popped out and snapped.

"Is not."

Hod got control of his wings before strangling himself.

"Is!"

Other Hod flopped them down.

"Is not."

The two entities squirmed on the ground, the conflict becoming more confusing as I watched. Torix coughed into his hand.

"Ahem...What precisely is going on here?"

Shalahora shrugged.

"My student is in limbo, and his halves fight for one another. Whichever wins decides his fate."

Hod strangled the ever-living stuffing out of himself.

"Hod not do it. Hod die first!"

Other Hod pulled his arms down.

"You idiot. You'll destroy us both."

Hod squirmed around.

"Hod don't care."

Other Hod pulled his hands from his neck.

"You must. It is what is just. It is what I choose...And I deserve a choice."

Hod strangled them again.

"Hod not care what just. Hod want friend."

Other Hod pulled them beside the edge of the stone cliff.

"I am no friend of yours. You would know this after I am gone."

Plazia's left arm twitched. Hod pulled them over to the cliff's edge.

"Hod choose Hod friends. You Hod friend."

Hod jerked himself off the cliff, and they fell for a half second. I pulled them up with a gravity well. Continuing their struggle, they gnarled and thrashed at each other.

"Hod want Hod friend."

"No. Let me give back what I have stolen."

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"No."

"Yes."

"No."

They scrambled for a while. I peered at Shalahora.

"Hod seems the same."

Shalahora's eyes narrowed.

"He has returned the freed piece of his mind to the void, silencing the part of himself that awakened."

Plazia oozed his words from the rock below.

"He would feed himself to that anathema?"

Shalahora raised a hand.

"He would. He has."

I set them down, and Hod heaved over the ground. He seethed.

"Hod...Hod know you. You know Hod. Hod remember. Hod know you care for Hod. Hod know you care for Hod when no one else care. You stay with Hod when Hod alone. You help Hod when no one else help. You Hod friend."

He made the edges of his wings into fists, pressing them and his head into the ground.

"And Hod not let go."

He hugged himself, and Other Hod spoke with a gentle voice.

"You must."

Hod let out a tear.

"Please. No."

Other Hod lowered his gaze.

"You would rob me of my choice?"

Hod took a breath.

"Hod...Hod don't know. Hod need think."

Althea walked over and gave Hod a hug.

"It's ok. I'm still here. We're all still here. Nothing happened yet."

Hod nodded, another tear dropping. I walked over and squatted down.

"You ok little guy?"

Hod nodded. I generated a quintessence crystal and handed it to him.

"There you go. Just relax. We'll make sure nothing happens too fast for you, alright?"

Hod nodded, putting the crystal in his mouth. Shalahora murmured in his encompassing whisper.

"Other Hod wishes for Hod to become whole. Hod wishes to remain broken."

I furrowed my brow.

"That's not what I expected. Huh."

I turned to Hod.

"And wow. That is so sweet. I'm proud of you for sticking up for your friends."

Hod spread his wings before moving his head in a circle.

"Hod do what Hod must. But! Hod also spicy. Watch."

He moved his head at a rapid pace before swallowing the crystallized quintessence. Hod choked on it, but with a single arm, Althea Heimlich'd him, popping the crystal out. The motion was smooth and practiced, but Hod grabbed the crystal before it landed on the ground. He popped it back in his mouth again.

"Hod thank pretty lady."

Althea smiled.

"No problem."

Plazia walked over and dropped the Omega Crystal in front of Hod. Plazia oozed.

"You wish to stay corrupted? Do so."

Plazia turned away, opening a short-range portal to his study.

"But you are a fool."

The warp closed, and the Omega Strain oozed energy. I pointed at it.

"So, if we use this crystal, we might be able to make Other Hod-"

Hod lunged forward and swallowed it. The much smaller mana shard got stuck in his throat, but the cooler-sized Omega Strain slid down, defying the laws of physics. Althea and I gawked before Torix pinched his brow.

"It's like trying to control a rabid child."

Before it assimilated, I condensed a gravity well over the crystal and pulled it out. Hod deflated as I did. Setting the crystal outside arm's reach, I frowned.

"You don't even know what it does yet, do you?"

Hod gestured his wings to the crystal.

"It look tasty."

Shalahora flowed over, materializing in a cross-legged position beside Hod.

"Is that a lie?"

Hod crossed his arms.

"Hod caught. Hod want friend safe. Crystal make friend safe. Hod can tell."

Shalahora tapped Hod's forehead.

"In doing so, you risk losing who and what you are. This would sadden your friend deeply."

I sat down with Shalahora. I put a hand on Hod's shoulder.

"Do you mind if I talk to Other Hod?"

Hod looked away.

"Yes. Hod mind."

Other Hod came out, shadows effusing.

"What is it, Harbinger?"

I turned a palm to the guy.

"So you're trying to complete Hod. Do you mind if I ask why?"

Other Hod tilted his head.

"I have stolen what I am from him. Do I need another reason?"

Althea scratched the side of her face.

"So, I don't think Daniel's wondering why you want to return the stolen part. He's, hm, he's asking why you think you stole from him."

I peered at Althea.

"Can you tell me?"

She shrugged.

"Yeah, but-"

Other Hod placed a large, shadowy hand over her shoulder.

"Let me...Please."

Althea made herself comfortable, hugging her thighs to her chest.

"Of course."

Other Hod lowered his arm, facing me.

"I...I know what I am. Every time I am emboldened to fight or kill in your name, I experience...An internal struggle. I wish to consume. To drink blood and gorge on flesh. I choose not to, but it is latent within me, a desire I fight every day."

Other Hod gestured to his shadows.

"These shadows are a part of what I am, but they are also a part of what Hod once was."

Althea frowned.

"Hey, we talked about this. We agreed that wasn't the case."

Other Hod shook his head.

"Those are words. I know that Hod was a being of immense insight and understanding. My growth was fueled by his dimming light. These-"

He tried rubbing his shadows off, but they returned in a second.

"These shadows are his darkness."

He lowered his gaze.

"My strength is a manifestation of his dying."

All this time, I never understood why Other Hod had tried taking care of Hod or why he experienced his guilt. He reminded me of my feelings for Springfield and how I abandoned the town. In actuality, I'd fought tooth and nail for the place, but I never believed that. To me, I let that place die to Yawm.

Other Hod never believed he fought for Hod either.

Trying to help, I put the Rise of Eden over Other Hod.

"That's...That's hard."

Other Hod nodded.

"It is. I am not this feeling of protection or understanding. Those are the pieces of Hod I stole. I am the hunger, the malice, and the hate. I am sane through his insanity. I am patient by his impatience."

He curled his shadowy hands into fists.

"And I wish to give back what I have stolen. The Sun Swallower has given me that chance, and I want to seize it."

Other Hod shook his fists.

"But Hod...Hod wishes to steal it from me."

Hod came out.

"Hod say you stole from Hod First. Hod steal from you now."

Hod bonked himself on the head.

"Bad friend. Bad."

I raised a hand.

"Wait a second, stop fighting."

Hod was strangling himself again, but he stopped as I spoke. He squawked.

"Hod do as Harbinger say."

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Ok, I think I understand how you feel."

Hod puffed his chest out, putting his wings on his hips.

"Hod knew Harbinger would."

I shook my head.

"No, I mean Other Hod."

Other Hod enveloped Hod, and he narrowed his red eyes.

"How?"

Althea and the others leaned in. I scratched my head, not wanting to answer, but Althea told me her story when I felt down. It helped me, so I pushed through my unease.

"I'm kind of in the same boat. If you think about it, I'm just a normal kid from some midwest town. I had nothing going for me before Schema arrived, and even after getting trapped in a dungeon, I wasn't anything special."

Torix raised a hand.

"No. No, you will not say that about y-"

I turned to him.

"Come on. Let me say my piece."

Torix squeezed his hand to a fist while peering down. He shook his head.

"Speak your nonsense."

I spread my hands.

"I was just some lazy kid. You guys don't even know, but I was failing high school. That takes effort. Millions of people could've done so much more with this armor. Every damn day I know that. It's like...It beats me over the head. All the time. Never ceasing. Relentless."

I nodded.

"So yeah. You feel like you stole Hod's destiny. I get that because I always feel like I'm failing mine."

The wind whistled over the trees and stones, the branches bending in the breeze. Torix's eyes flared red before he walked over. He slapped the back of my head. It didn't hurt, but I gawked at him.

"What's the problem?"

Torix held his hand up, and it shook. He wanted to say something before stopping. He peered away before composing himself.

"You...You think you're failing your destiny?"

Seeing his rage boiling under the surface, I frowned.

"Uhm, maybe? I don't know. I was just talking."

His wrath grew. I scratched my cheek.

"You know what? I, for real, didn't even mean it."

Torix snapped.

"No, you told us what you think. It's what you believe to be true."

He shook his head, throwing his hand to the side.

"You do realize we all have a path we walk, don't you?"

A bit nervous, I furrowed my brow.

"Yes. Maybe. No."

Torix gestured to everyone.

"None of us know where we are going. None of us have any idea what we're doing. We're all making the best of our given circumstances and situations. As an example, I

spent centuries on my planet's moon, idling away on meaningless experiments and esoteric study. I accomplished nothing."

Torix pointed at me, his eyes flaring.

"In half a decade, you built a planetary empire, saved your homeworld, and brought a galactic faction to its knees. You've rallied together people from all walks of life. You've saved three different species, two from outright extinction."

Torix put his hand right beside my face, pointing it like a weapon.

"You gave us all something to fight for, including me, an aimless lich exiled by his family."

I leaned back. He leaned forward.

"That is to say, no one, and I mean no one, will so much as insinuate that my disciple is a failure. Not even himself."

A bird flew past us, landing on Shalahora's shoulder. It cawed before I coughed into a hand.

"Ahem...Message received."

Torix leaned back, his eyes dimming from red to pink. He gazed around before brushing himself off.

"Yes, well then...Ahem."

He interlocked his hands behind himself.

"Perhaps I overdid it. Do excuse me if you would."

Althea hopped up.

"I don't think so. I'm glad you slapped some sense into the big guy. And yeah, I hate it when he talks like that too."

She shrugged.

"Sheesh, if he's lazy, then what are we?"

The group laughed while Althea peered around, beaming.

"I mean, really though?"

Other Hod stood up, staring at me.

"You are one of the few that deserve to be free of guilt. If you have found pain in your circumstances, then it may be found by anyone. I am no different, so I shall try to uncover where my guilt is deserving and where it is not."

I pulled the shadowed Omega Strain over to my palm. I moved it in front of Other Hod.

"Well, we should be able to get more out of Hod and more out of you with this."

Torix jumped into the conversation.

"Yes. Indeed. If you assimilate this viral entity, your eldritch half will grow."

Other Hod marveled at the stone.

"It is...Beautiful. Tantalizing, even."

Shalahora flashed beside him, pointing at it.

"I have seen its effects on the mind. You will expand, becoming greater. We shall be able to peel pieces of Hod's memories and mind from you, giving it back. We shall feed you this strength, ceasing your death."

I smiled.

"We'll get more Hod and Other Hod."

Hod's head replaced Other Hod's.

"Hod become...Super Hod."

I burst into laughter. The entire conversation had many tone shifts from Hod's interruptions, but I couldn't help but love the guy. Shalahora tilted his head.

"In a sense, yes."

Shalahora tapped the gem.

"You told me that you wished to uncover what you are. It may be done, but you must risk everything."

Shalahora grabbed the stone, holding it in front of Hod.

"Are you willing to leave Hod's wake, or will you linger in his gloom?"

Other Hod stood, his shadow looming over the Omega Strain.

"I am a parasite, feasting on a memory of what was."

Other Hod reached out, and his voice deepened. His claws sharpened, and his shadows flared like charcoal-colored fire. His voice seeped into our surroundings.

"I will walk out of his shade and into my own."

As he grasped the stone, his voice rumbled like thunder.

"And I'll be of my own making."

Chapter 386: A Shadow, Reborn

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"I will walk out of his shade and into my own."

As he grasped the stone, his voice rumbled like thunder.

"And I will become a monster of my own making."

We all watched, waiting for a flashy transformation. As the seconds passed on, Shalahora leaned towards the strain.

"It would seem this sample is inert."

Other Hod nodded.

"Perhaps it is broken?"

Hod popped out.

"Hod too strong. Hod probably broke it."

Torix stepped up to them.

"If it were so simple, we'd of uncovered the strain's assimilation after finding them in the first place, as would the eldritch on Blegara. That being said, I can help you with the assimilation process. If you'd like, of course."

Other Hod scratched his shadowed cheek.

"Uhm... Yes."

Torix grabbed the strain.

"The assimilation method involves three distinct processes. The first is psionic occupation. You must allow it to incorporate into your mind. Once it's manifested there, you steadily pull its mind into your own. If the strain develops memory and consciousness, it will no longer assimilate."

Torix snapped his fingers.

"If that is the case, you or the strain dies."

Althea frowned.

"Is that why you guys hadn't figured out the assimilation thing yet?"

Torix scoffed.

"Indeed. It's not very often you get an eldritch who wishes to share their mind with a prototypical kin. We applied plenty of force to instigate the process, along with Plazia sacrificing many eldritch under his control. It's a shame the hivemind wished to leave before we could finish this."

Torix waved his hand.

"Alas, he's likely planning his invasion of Blegara as we speak. Now-"

He placed the strain onto Other Hod's hands.

"I will simulate its mental effects by occupying a part of your mind. You will steadily attempt to chip away at the parts of me within your psyche. After some practice, we shall attempt the strain with my and Shalahora's supervision."

Torix put a fingertip against Other Hod's forehead.

"Are you ready?"

Other Hod nodded, and the lich rushed into his mind. Hod's head fell back, and he writhed on the ground before Torix stood up. The lich walked around the eldritch.

"You must learn to defend and offend at once. It is easy to do either, but in doing both, you attain a higher level of competence in this given domain."

The training brought back memories. Shalahora murmured.

"You...Are very skilled. More so than even I."

Torix waved his hand.

"Nonsense. We've sparred a few times. I'd be evaporated by you utterly."

Shalahora tilted his head.

"To win and to be better are two different things."

Torix's eyes flared.

"Then I'll accept your gracious victory. As for you, Other Hod-"

Torix interlocked his hands behind himself.

"We must practice and with diligence."

We watched Other Hod flopping on the ground like a fish out of water for a while. While waiting, I planned out a few amulets I would make. All the major players in my guild deserved one, not just Elthara. By the time I finished scrabbling the nearly hundred pages of runes, the sun had crossed over our heads and into the night.

Other Hod faced Torix in their fights by then. As beads of darkness dripped from Other Hod, Torix placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You are ready."

The sunset crossed over us before night arrived in its navy splendor. Only a slither of the moon crawled out, leaving the stars exposed. Hod had molded into his surroundings, exposing only his red eyes. Shalahora left nothing of his previous form, and he spoke from all directions.

"Be ready, child."

Other Hod murmured in the dark.

"We are."

Other Hod placed his hand onto the Omega Strain, and it flowed into his body through his palm. It sunk claws through Other Hod, ripping and tearing up his arm before settling into his chest girdle. Once within, it coursed with energy, and Hod flopped backward. Other Hod growled.

"It...Is painful."

Shadows enveloped Hod, coursing out like flaming gasoline. Other Hod let out a roar. Crystalline fingers tore out his arms, face, and body. His shadow oozed over the dark blue night, jet black overcoming anything it touched. The splatters crossed the air, and where they passed, the stars above flickered.

Shalahora seethed.

"Contain it. You are able."

Other Hod growled.

"I...I am trying."

Shalahora murmured.

"You cannot try. This is something you must do and for more than Hod. For you as well."

His words resonated around us. Other Hod took a few breaths. Well, if you could call it breathing. His body devolved into a writhing horror of moving crystal and spilling blood. Shalahora's words flooded everyone's minds.

"Become its master and shaper. Mold it to your own making, a piece of an evergrowing mind. Of your mind. Of what you are. Of what you will become."

Other Hod winced, his eyes leaking like shattered ink vials.

"How?"

Shalahora's voice omened.

"What you hate in yourself, you must accept. You must embrace."

Stolen novel; please report.

Other Hod rasped.

"I...I cannot."

Shalahora whispered.

"Then you will die."

Shalahora's mind bled into our surroundings, a palpable entity.

"And you will never know what you are. Hod will die with you, his memories lost."

Nervous, I channeled mana into my runes. The navy blue glow gave me a slight view of Other Hod. He fumbled, writhing in pain. He faced the ground, taking deep breaths as his shadowed form bubbled up in places. Spiny tendrils erupted from him, forming wings like umbral bones.

Other Hod slammed his head into the stone, darkness dripping from his wounded head.

"I will do this...You will not overtake-"

More spines coursed from his back. Other Hod's voice gurgled.

"I will stay here."

The spines formed into wings and dark ribs, coursing around Other Hod's shadowed form.

"He...He was kind to me."

From his red eyes, blood leaked like dripping ink.

"He told me-"

A dark shard pierced out of his beak.

"We were broken."

Several spikes tore out of his left eye.

"He was whole. I broke him. I stole his life."

A tendril of dark, reflective crystal gored out of his mouth. He gurgled.

"You will...Not take mine."

I stepped up.

"Alright, he needs help-"

Shalahora materialized and placed a hand over my chest. He met my eye. The sounds of Other Hod dying echoed around us, and I glared.

"This is enough. Are you trying to kill him?"

Shalahora whispered.

"This is his triumph...Tell me, would you take that from him?"

I glowered at him, but Shalahora stared back at me. The lurching and horror spilled out behind the shadowy Sovereign.

I pulled back.

"If he dies, you'll pay."

Other Hod and the Omega Strain wrestled for minutes. After a while, the rupturing shards stopped piercing his form. The strain skittered about like a crystal spider wearing Other Hod's body from the inside. The movement slowed until it stopped. Other Hod murmured.

"Enough."

The shards shook before one retracted in a slow, agonizing pull. Another minute later and another tendril returned to Other Hod's form. Minutes passed between each spine drawing in, and Other Hod drenched the cliff face with his blood. His breathing rasped, his lungs filling with sanguine fluid. He groaned in agony.

But he did not relent.

He shook in pain and trembled in torment. As he let out a sound, I hardly believed it - he laughed. He smiled, his beak twisting in an unnatural gesture. He grabbed the sides of his head.

"I will know it."

He tore patches of his shadows off.

"I will feel what I am. Who I am. Not Hod. Not a monster."

He writhed before slamming a fist into the rock.

"I am the other, he who lurks within and beneath. I am no shadow of Hod."

He clawed into the rock, and it disintegrated as if acid splashed over the stone.

"I am my own darkness. I walk within my own wake."

His form expanded.

"Onto my own way. Onto my own path."

He stood, his body torn asunder.

"For he who saw what I could be."

The Omega strain shivered in agony, a dying insect within.

"And to know it."

He swallowed the darkness, and the darkness swallowed him.

"My shadow."

He fell onto his knees, exhaustion creeping in. Before we could help, we found no light falling over us. Shalahora isolated the space, casting us into an artificial void. Other Hod indulged in it, devouring the darkness. He howled. He roared into the night. By the time the squirming crystal ceased its movements inside him, Other Hod rested in a pile of split skin and dried gore.

He heaved for breath before sitting on his legs. He peered up, letting his arms fall palm up on the ground. Light returned, exposing his shape. Even the meager light of the moon left everything saturated compared to Shalahora's darkness. Other Hod murmured.

"It...Is done."

A palpable wave of relief rushed over us, but I still winced at the sight. This was like seeing my armor transformations from so long ago. Watching it was a different test than the actual experience, and I wasn't used to being on this side of the coin. More acclimatized to this, Althea sprung into action. She tackled Other Hod, giving him a bear hug before picking Other Hod off the ground. She squeezed.

"Hah, I'm so proud of you. I knew you could do it. I knew it, knew it, knew it!"

Other Hod gurgled.

"Injured."

She let go.

"Oh...Sorry."

Other Hod stumbled up.

"I am fine. Thank you."

I stepped to him.

"What about Hod?"

Shalahora materialized beside us.

"I picked pieces of his fragmented memory together from Other Hod as he devoured the Omega Strain."

Torix's fire eyes might as well have been lighthouses in the dark.

"He didn't assimilate with it?"

Shalahora writhed in and out of the dark.

"No. Other Hod was an incomplete entity designed to feast on its host. He found a new host to indulge in, allowing him to give away part of what he had taken in. I ensured this took place, and that is why he struggled so deeply."

Shalahora peered at Other Hod. Warmth radiated from the Sovereign.

"He did so for his friend."

Other Hod took a moment, composing himself. He turned to Torix.

"May I eat more of the Omega Strains?"

Shalahora's form rippled.

"Meditate on who and what you've become. Learn it. Soak it in. Once you've achieved mastery and understanding, more growth may take place. Hod needs time to sort through his differences as well."

Shalahora placed a hand on Other Hod's shoulder.

"Be patient. This will come to pass. I will ensure it."

Other Hod nodded.

"Yes...Also, I am tired. I will-"

His shadows stopped spawning over him, and Hod's average body returned. Hod peered around, his eyes sharper than before. He raised a wing.

"Hod feel different. Like Hod walk out of dense fog."

Torix paced up.

"Would it bother you if I inspected your mind briefly?"

Hod tilted his head.

"Dry man want see Hod's greatness? Hod understand."

Torix tapped his side.

"He's remarkably unchanged, it would seem."

A minute later, Torix finished his inspection. The lich shook his head.

"First impressions can be wrong. Hes-"

Hod put a wing against Torix's mouth.

"Shhh. Hod show them."

Taking a step away from us, Hod spread his wings. Two yellow feathers formed and floated around him, following a helix pattern as they fell. A burst of yellow mana spiraled up when they landed on the ground. I turned to Torix.

"What kind of mana is that?"

Torix gawked.

"I don't know."

The yellow energy coursed before creating a complex insignia over Hod. It split down the middle and opened. An eye stared at its surroundings. As it lingered over me, my hair stood on end. It reminded me of an Old One peering through me. As the magic faded, Hod lowered his wings.

"Hod see lot. Much things."

He pointed his wings at me.

"Harbinger. Hod see five eyes follow you."

I nodded.

"What were they?"

Hod raised his winged arm and spindly hand.

"One eye of anger and rage. One eye of facts and knowledge. One eye of time and sound. One eye of lies and paranoia. One eye of sacrifice and change."

Shalahora's eyes widened.

"You can see them?"

Hod shrugged.

"Hod not know what Hod sees."

Trying to connect the dots, I mulled over what Hod was talking about. It all clicked, and I spread my hands.

"You can see the Old Ones stalking me?"

Hod waved his wings.

"Hod great. Hod great. Hod best. Hod best."

I counted on my fingers.

"Anger and rage? That's Baldowah. Facts and knowledge? Etorhma. Time and sound? Eonoth, probably?"

Shalahora murmured like broken glass.

"Lies and paranoia? It is an Old One I know well."

I frowned.

"Yeah, M. But the last one. Sacrifice and change? I've never heard of that one before."

Althea walked over to me.

"I think...I think it's the one that made those, er, chain things for Valgus. Uhm, maybe. Really, I don't know."

I gave her a nod.

"No, that's good thinking."

Remembering the piercing gaze as I acclimatized to those shackles, I shivered.

"Yeah...We don't know its name, but it knows ours. Anyways-"

I turned a hand to Hod.

"You never told me you could use magic before."

Hod shook his head.

"Hod could not. Hod not gaining new things. Hod unlocking old things."

Torix stepped up with his head tilted.

"Perhaps you've unlocked a portion of your subconscious mind, and it will unveil itself over time?"

Hod puffed out his chest.

"Dry man, right. Hod barely touch upon Hod's greatness."

Torix sighed.

"Some things never change."

Hod nodded.

"Like dry man think Hod best."

Torix spread his hands.

"That's-"

Hod put a wing against his mouth.

"Shhhhh. Hod understand. Hod overwhelmed too sometimes."

Althea laughed before I put a hand on Hod's shoulder.

"That magic of yours is incredible. If we can unlock it further, we might learn more about the Old Ones, like where they are or what they're doing."

Hod nodded.

"Or what Old Ones like eat. Hod like chicken. Maybe Old Ones like chicken?"

He waved his hands in grand gestures.

"Hod give chicken to Old Ones. Old Ones leave Hod and Harbinger alone. Maybe give chicken to Hod and Harbinger? Hod think good plan."

I weighed my hands back and forth.

"Eh, it's as good a plan as any."

Hod peered at my primordial, self-augmentation rune. He pointed at it.

"Good writing. Hod like it."

I peered down.

"The rune? You can read it?"

Hod shook his head.

"No. Hod know it good though. It feel right."

As he said that, I realized I didn't know who Hod had been. Not even a little bit. I needed to get together with some Eltari and learn more about who Hod was before his eldritchification occurred. All I had were a few vague hints from years ago, but fully applying Hod's talents required knowing what the guy could do. From what I gathered, his past was the key to unlocking that knowledge.

To get that done, I sent a few messages to some Eltari as the sun rose in the distance. Torix raised a hand.

"We'll stay in touch, everyone. I've experiments to run and a hivemind to temper."

He walked through a warp. Shalahora raised several shades around Althea and Hod.

"Your training must continue."

Althea sighed while Hod karate-kicked at one of the shades. They fought while I stepped away, immersed in thought. Unlocking Hod's abilities could give us a vantage point for seeing the Old Ones. His mana type also reminded me of the weird mana signature that Valgus's shackles responded to. It wasn't the same, just similar.

Regardless, if I learned it, I might gain another dimensional wake.

First things first, I checked the replies to what I sent earlier. A few Eltari could get together for a talk in a few hours after completing some daily dungeon clears. They'd been helping out some villages in Illinois, and I didn't want them to drop everything for what I wanted.

Having a gap of time, I opened up my grimoire. Mana flooded into my body, and my primordial wake covered the mountain. I'd finish the follower amulets, and in addition, I'd create a stockpile of various gear made of me. I'd have it protected in an armory, and different Speakers in the guild could give out the equipment as extra rewards for continued excellence. It'd be like a tier system for various guild members.

Before I fell into my work, a crash erupted in the distance. Trees fell as an architect golem sliced the forest apart with its bladed feet. Kessiah walked beside it, pointing it in different directions. Further out, a guardian golem inspected people, ensuring nothing happened here. The executive toiled away in the inner sanctum while the vanguards patrolled near Springfield and other towns.

Mt. Verner was safe. Plazia would secure Blegara after we talked, and Schema hadn't dropped any tasks at my feet about what I needed to do next. It left me plenty of room to prioritize new tasks. Considering what I could do, I set up another plan for the near future.

It was time to conquer Earth.

Chapter 387: The Makings of an Empire

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It was time to conquer Earth.

Making that happen required a lot of steps. The most integral part involved handling the roaming eldritch and general dungeons. Eldritch could spill into their surroundings and morph an entire landscape in a few months. Stopping that saved people but also gave me official, Schema-verified control of an area.

Given my planet ownership, I'd take a percentage of the experience and credits they earned in controlled zones. My gains for killing an eldritch reduced to nothing because of my level, but my guildmates' rewards wouldn't be. The percentage of their earned experience was worth more than what I would get if I killed the eldritch myself.

That's why this was the best path to capping my level. The decision seemed intentional by Schema. He limited the experience I gained through the over-leveled experience reduction. In turn, my only way of capping my level was by building an empire and controlling an area. This weaponized my greed and desire for power, turning it into a force for good.

Greed was good. In this context, at least.

However, levels didn't matter as much to me in the grand scheme of things. Honestly, I'd wanted to do this for a long time. After the Yawm situation, I headed to Giess to get rid of my unknown status. In the process, I got embroiled in the war between Elysium and Schema. Helping Earth would've drawn Elysium here to use against me during that time. I fought a proxy war on Blegara before signing the ceasefire between Elysium and my guild.

I was finally primed to help Earth, and I did. It lasted a few months before Schema pulled me into the lottery. It was one thing after another, and it felt like I had barely helped Earth after all this time. Thinking about it rationally, I had done what I could.

The reality was that most of this guilt came from my warped sense of time. It had barely been five years since the system started on Earth, but I had probably experienced a decade of actual living—maybe more.

The lottery added six months, not including my time magic. Having many minds made each second feel like several. I also never slept or ate anything, and that didn't even include the weird time flow of each rift.

Even sitting on the stone shelf beside the others, I experienced a life of slow motion. My allies shifted with floaty movements, the sound around me bleeding in with a low drone. I did many things simultaneously, channeling mana into my cipher runes while thinking. My magic and skills left me out of touch with the real world, including what I was doing and the pace I did it at.

Taking a moment, I pinched the bridge of my nose and furrowed my brow. This feeling of inadequacy wouldn't disappear, but I remembered what Torix said earlier. I was doing my best in a crazy situation. We all were. That eased this feeling, but I aimed to get the rest of this guilt out of me.

To make that happen, I'd take care of Earth.

While searching for a starting point in the empire business, I found nothing to bite on. In fact, I knew next to nothing about my Sovereign, empire, or guild statuses. The messages always mentioned different rights but never explained anything in depth. It didn't help that I hadn't even spent a few minutes reading through them, either.

Taking a moment, I stopped that line of thinking in its tracks. It wasn't productive, and I gave myself some slack. Finally having the space to read, I opened my status screen and reread the empire messages. They contained little information outside of the Sovereign ones.

The class could give me a lot of money if I owned a lot of working cities and planets, but I didn't understand those systems that well, either. Wanting more info, I opened up a glossary for the system terms using my obelisk.

While Schema hoarded most information on his censored web, he kept this specific part out in the open. I started reading the guild rankings first.

Hello system user! This is a guide detailing the various rankings of guilds. Each guild ranking is established based on the organization's influence. For a simplified understanding, each rank-up usually signifies a tenfold increase in influence over the previous rank. Here are the specifics:

F Tier | A Hodgepodge, local group with little influence over even singular dungeons.

E Tier | This is an organized local group with an understanding of regional threats, dungeons, and factions. There is an established presence of control over an area, with usually more than ten members.

This rank is given a % of the revenues and experience within their controlled spaces. Usually 1-3%.

D Tier | This large organization has regimented control over a wide area of over twenty larger dungeons. This guild often has established 1-3 cities and has a large-scale presence over several regions. Guilds of this rank often have one hundred or more members.

This rank is given a % of the revenues and experience within their controlled spaces. Usually 2-3%.

This guild rank usually has established at least one city with a warping station and currency conversion establishment.

C Tier | Guilds of this rank have a national or multi-national level of influence. Often, they can control 20-30 cities with hundreds of dungeons under their direct control and clearing. They can even have slight sway on a planetary scale, though usually multiple C-tier guilds are required to have that level of effect.

This rank is given a % of the revenues and experience within their controlled spaces. Usually, 3%.

This guild rank usually has established at least ten cities with a warping station and currency conversion establishment.

This guild controls an economy, allowing for far greater taxation.

B Tier | These large, sprawling organizations usually control large portions of a planet. They can have significant control over a planet's surface, and allyships between B-tier guilds are decisive for a planet's overall state of being.

This rank is given a % of the revenues and experience within their controlled spaces. Usually 4-5%.

This guild rank usually has established at least one hundred cities with a warping station and currency conversion.

This guild controls an economy, allowing for far greater taxation.

This guild controls a large functioning army, allowing for war against other planets.

A Tier | These are guilds with a total planetary influence. They are almost always dominant within their home world and solar systems. These guilds usually have established mining operations outside planetary bounds, such as on nearby moons or asteroids. They also can hold vessels off-world.

This rank is given a % of the revenues and experience within their controlled spaces. Usually 5-15%. *Excluding planetary ownership rates.

This guild rank usually has established at least a thousand cities with a warping station and currency conversion establishment.

These guilds control an economy, allowing for far greater taxation.

These guilds control a large functioning army, allowing for war against other planets.

A case of theft: this story is not rightfully on Amazon; if you spot it, report the violation.

This guild usually has one to multiple species operating at a lower and upper class via passive questing.

S- Tier | These guilds have branched out to multiple planets' worth of contact and control, allowing them to influence entire star systems. They have many economies, cultures, and species under their wing. They almost always control multiple planets, and their combat ability makes eldritch less of a threat than other high-tier guilds.

This rank is given a % of the revenues and experience within their controlled spaces. Usually 5-15%. *This excludes planetary ownership taxes.*

This guild rank usually has established at least ten-thousand cities with warping stations and currency conversion establishments.

These guilds control an economy, allowing for far greater taxation.

These guilds control enormous armies, allowing for war against multiple planets.

These guilds usually have multiple species operating at a lower and upper class via passive questing.

These guilds have accomplished S tier bounties, quests, and assignments given by Schema or Schema-verified Speakers.

S Tier | These guilds have branched out to multiple solar systems' worth of contact and control, allowing them to influence entire galactic segments. They have innumerable economies, cultures, and species under their wings. They always control multiple planets, and their combat ability allows them to handle any threat.

This rank is given a % of the revenues and experience within their controlled spaces. Usually 5-15%. *This excludes planetary ownership taxes.*

This guild rank usually has established at least a hundred thousand cities with warping stations and currency conversion establishments.

These guilds control an economy, allowing for far greater taxation.

These guilds control planetary destroying armies.

These guilds usually have many species operating at a lower and upper class via passive questing.

These guilds have accomplished S tier bounties, quests, and assignments by Speakers or Schema.

These guilds are given special privileges by Schema.

S+ Tier | These guilds are the highest existence within Schema-owned space. They are ancient, revered, and worshipped organizations that have stood the test of time. The backbone of Schema-based society is founded on these guilds, and they prevent the eldritch from spiraling out of control via fringe worlds.

This rank is given a % of the revenues and experience within their controlled spaces. Usually 5-15%. *This excludes planetary ownership taxes.*

This guild rank usually has established at least a million cities with warping stations and currency conversion establishments.

These guilds control an economy, allowing for far greater taxation.

These guilds own galactic influencing armies.

These guilds usually have one to multiple species operating at a lower class and upper class via passive questing.

These guilds have accomplished S+ tier bounties, quests, and assignments by Speakers or Schema.

These guilds are given special privileges by Schema.

These guilds are always prioritized during galactic councils or during system updates.

After reading through the massive pile of information, I set my guild's actual rank somewhere in the S- to C rank. Our combat ability rivaled what the S- Tier was supposed to dish out, if not a bit more, but we lacked the influence Schema mentioned. I required far more cities, economic influence, and dungeon control to be that level.

Getting to the following breakdown, I opened my imperial menu, which was never mentioned in the status updates.

Hello, ruler class individual(s)! This is a status screen dictating ownership of an empire. Empires can enact vast levels of control within their realm. Those options are listed below:

- City Establishment -

Allows for conditional city establishment assuming:

- A. Secured area without dungeons.

- B. No eldritch within city confines.

- C. Operating economy of larger than 100,000 individuals.

- D. Permits and documentation acquired from a Schema-verified Speaker.

- E. Areas allocated for warp and currency conversion centers near the city's center.

- F. Military control of the area.

- Resource Ownership -

Allows for ownership of all within your controlled domain. If not unlocked, Schema may confiscate particular objects of value.

Certain ores, such as orichalcum, will otherwise be confiscated.

Any willful illegal activity will result in the loss of owned territory unless this is enabled.

- Passive Questing -

Allows for the application of passive questing to select species within your domain. These species have their rights detailed by you. *Menu available.*

There are numerous hierarchical positioning opportunities for these passive questing opportunities.

If members leave their passive quests uncompleted, punishments may be enacted. Rewards are also available. *Menu available.*

- Planetary Ownership Rights -

Removes the limit to the number of planets owned.

You may assign ownership of different planets to different guild members. This unlocks various classes for these individuals.

Note - Ownership of planets does not guarantee income. Areas must first have dungeons cleared and processed consistently. A functioning economy exponentially increases income via credit exchange, and Speakers can further elevate spaces via questing and assignments.

Inspecting the passive questing menu gave me some valuable insight into guilds. It was how different caste systems were enabled within empires. For instance, Obolis's empire likely used passive punishment quests to keep subservient species in line.

When he granted me the skeptiles and Vagni, Obolis gave me the right to use this menu however I pleased with them. In effect, it was another name for slavery since the punishments could be damn near anything. They were even free.

On the other hand, the reward menu came out of my pocket, explaining how Obolis kept the albony on top. They could complete easy passive quests for rewards, which got

them ahead. The effects compounded, leading to vast economic differences over time. Either way, individuals could overcome these systems, but as a whole, a species couldn't.

Peering at the other bonuses, they explained some of what I'd unlocked over the years. Having Schema recognize my monolith cities during the lottery accomplished more and less than I expected. Pretty much anyone could establish a city anywhere if they fulfilled the requirements. This made my monolith cities seem far less unique.

However, the more I thought about it, the more I dispelled that line of logic. The hardest part of establishing a city was the requirement for 100,000 people working nearby. That was essentially impossible on a fringe world and would've been extraordinarily impossible on L-7. The other conditions piled onto that inconvenience to the point where cities didn't seem worthwhile on questionable planets.

My process skipped all that, letting me ignore the red tape and flaming hoops everyone else dealt with. I could even have dungeons and eldritch within my cities, allowing me to harvest gains from them. That meant that once the dungeoneering problem was solved, the other parts of empire management would fall in place.

That process began with Earth. I wanted everybody in my guild so they'd reap the benefits of my endurance legacy and tree bonuses. It would give humanity a leg up that they needed against the eldritch. Beyond that, offering basic supplies and necessities would help people prioritize leveling.

Most of that could be handled by building a constructor golem and sending them off. It could give food, water, and shelter to people. Beating basic eldritch also wouldn't be a problem, given how much stronger my golems were because of my stats. However, they could be abused.

My constructor golems lacked finesse, being unable to manage themselves or handle complex situations. We needed some task handlers for the big lugs of steel. After consideration, I figured pretty much any guildmate would do.

It was something I'd thought about for a while. My guildmates had survived Yawm's invasion or joined the guild through Torix's recruitment. My legacy allowed them to establish necessities and threats for a settlement, especially with a golem's help. I could run in afterward, sweep the place clean of Eldritch with Event Horizon, and establish a city.

Flying around would take a while, so I figured having Helios with me for warping was necessary. In fact, I could establish a few preliminary cities around major population centers before starting the operation. The warp centers and Schema's shops could help the teams travel faster and manage supplies. I could also model what and how I wanted this done.

Once established, I'd start taking in talent with assigned Speakers for different places. Leaving a stockpile of earnable rings and artifacts in the cities would be the icing on top. With my guild members in each city, we could communicate with our guild messaging. If anything went awry, I could be there in moments.

Income would pour in, and I could buy a ton of obelisks. I'd send them to each city since communication would be vital. We'd need a thousand golems and guild members helping out for the plan to work. I'd sweep to the largest population centers before we all dished out help in more rural areas.

It seemed like a reasonable plan and utilized my guild's full potential. In fact, I could get a reference sheet for the most populated areas pre-Schema. With it, I could send a golem-guildmate team, or GGT, per million people on the given site. Detroit would get ten GGTs, while Lansing would get about two.

It seemed like a reasonable plan for now.

Before moving on, my extra psyches inspected my different status screens while I toiled. I might be missing something they'd find. They handled that while I returned to my current task - making the amulets for everybody. These artifacts ensured my guildmates' safety while I left, letting them go anywhere without worry.

Well, without my worry, that is. After watching Obolis's downfall, I couldn't help but find myself in a similar place. He founded his empire and jumpstarted his species' prosperity, but he hoarded his gifts. Because he never took the time to fully arm those close to him, he lost everyone. I wouldn't be caught dead in the same position.

That's why I would take this moment to ensure my people's safety. It was why I spent so much time on Mt. Verner, even as people died halfway across the globe. I was being selfish, and I couldn't deny that. But if I lost someone because I was conquering a territory instead of protecting them, it would kill me on the inside.

To stop that, I pulled out a dozen blue cores, rotating them above me like a solar system of glowing Neptunes. Taking out my list of deserving guild members, I popped my grimoire out of my dimensional storage. I opened it and faced the cipheric carving I jotted down while Hod trained with Torix. I had a hundred-plus pages to reference.

It was time to deck my guild out.

Chapter 388: Artifacts and Delegation

Before moving on, I had my extra psyches inspect my different status screens further. I might be missing something they'd find. They handled that while I returned to my current task - making the amulets for everybody. This would ensure their safety while I left, letting them go anywhere without worry.

I pulled out a dozen blue cores, my list of deserving guild members, and the cipheric carving I handled while Hod trained with Torix.

It was time to deck my guild out.

Checking out the carvings I made, I copied most of Elthara's amulet sigils while leaving certain sections blank. This ensured all amulets gave generic buffs, but I could add what I wanted for each team member. In the empty spots I left behind, I filled in different parts that my guildmates might need.

After getting my planning set up, I began carving out the quintessant cores. They were the easiest to make. Mild-mannered and motivating, they supported whatever buffs I put onto an amulet, ensuring the individual shined.

The other mana types proved more finicky, just like with the golems. Primordial amulets wanted to change the wearer, but I contained their urges by putting many hard stops in place, similar to the executive golem. Even more challenging to manage, the ascendant cores siphoned the wearer's mana and health, trying to kill them.

Instead of smothering their urge to commit evil, I redirected it. The new strategy worked better than the restrictions but still proved volatile. When I used both strategies together, I got the results I wanted.

With the cores tamed, I tried making the quintessant amulets as practice for the more complex dungeon hearts. Starting with Krog, I molded a tail band. For a gialgathen, Jewelry lacked the utility of raw metal since the band's heft could be a weapon. The

flying amphibians' tail attacks would have added weight, even without magic like gravitation or telekinesis.

For Krog's band, I focused on giving him more control of sound and vibrations. I put a stabilization rune for tones in the band. This allowed Krog to hold a note in his roars more easily. Hypothetically, he could resonate the pitch with an enemy, building vibrations in them until they disintegrated. It would be like an opera singer breaking a glass but with enemies' bones and bodies. I'd need him to test it out.

With plenty of supervision, of course. Safety first.

I also gave the band gravitation, telekinesis, and standard buffing. Krog could manipulate his weight and redirect his physical attacks, adding a new dimension to his physical combat. Time would tell what he'd accomplish with it, but I was excited already.

After finishing Krog's band, I moved to Shalahora's trinket. I went with a pair of earrings instead of an amulet. Aesthetically, it suited the shadow much better, and I put a blue core in each of them, knowing Shalahora could handle two.

Instead of amplifying his strong skills, I tried filling in what he couldn't do. After all, Shalahora's mind magic was absolute, so I couldn't improve it further. By contrast, when he handled the Shaelance Glaive, Shalahora couldn't control the quintessence flow. These earrings would allow him to do that or any other random magic he happened to need.

I couldn't add magic I didn't know about, but I had now developed a wide array of skills. Gravitation and telekinesis were the most manageable powers to add, but I piled on others. Temperature manipulation, matter generation, elemental magics, and even unguided mana flows, I kept piling on different sorceries until I hit a threshold. By now, the item's complexity scared me.

Perfect.

I grabbed the earrings, trying to use them. Most of the magic worked at a decent level. For the last test, I made matter with them. Any material would do, so I didn't direct the ornaments in any way. I let the earring choose its core attribute, expressing its central being. Great idea on my part. Profound, even.

With a tremendous flow and immense force, a wave of crabs erupted onto the side of Mt. Verner. Coconut crabs, Dungeness crabs, Chesapeake blue crabs, and even Tasmanian giant crabs flooded our surroundings in a veritable crabocalypse. They snapped like nobody's business and crushed trees below with immense, crabby weight.

Truly crabs-tacular.

Before they snapped the slab of stone we rested on, I made a gentle gravity well over us. The crabs congregated into a mass before I pulled native wildlife out of the bunch. Once I got only crustaceans, I evaporated the poor guys with Event Horizon.

Althea pulled a straggling crab out of her hair.

"What was that?"

I frowned, gazing off into the distance.

"Sorry, guys. I was-"

I narrowed my eyes, solemn as stone.

"Feeling crabby."

After a series of boos and having crabs thrown at me, I moved on to the next amulet. Well, artifact, honestly. Sticking with Florence, I made another set of earrings. Undoubtedly, the guy could pull these off, and I set them as weightless and quintessant. Florence wouldn't want to fight his artifacts all the time.

They amplified his general aura and charisma while letting him speak at different volumes. I combined it with several psionic defense systems, ensuring his mental security. The last part would be an intimidation aura. Ascendant mana would've been much better at that specific skill, but this would suffice.

The last quintessant core was for Kessiah. I gave her a belt buckle, knowing she always wore different ones. This one helped with regenerating blood, her most pressing bottleneck. It also helped with stability, calmness, and general power. While handling

her healing, she could stay still in unstable areas. I also installed some primary psionic defenses like the other members.

Moving on, I made the ascendant cores next. These would be risky but high value, and I knew certain members could handle them. Starting with Helios, I designed a gauntlet to counter his current one. He'd already shown the ability to wield multiple artifacts fluently, so I built this one with that in mind. In particular, I wanted him to take full advantage of his void ice.

This ascendant amulet would give him telekinetic and gravitational abilities. The force of their application dwarfed my previous incarnations, and unlike the other charms, this focused on casting magic rather than adding generic skills. It still buffed him, but that wasn't the emphasis.

This specialization amplified its effects. Even a few test runs could uproot trees and launch them like spears. I couldn't get the finesse of my magic out of the gauntlet, but it handled tasks like moving a single stone or hitting one from afar. It was up to Helios to learn these tools and use them.

Knowing the guy, he would use them well.

The following ascendant construct was for Althea. She entered a berserker state when using her chems or Kessiah's special blood types. I wanted Althea to learn how to control that via an ascendant core. At the same time, the dungeon heart carried powerful psionics to help her out. The goal would be to stop anything from vaporizing her memories and psionic sanctity.

It also included telekinesis and force redistribution. Althea hit hard with all her general strength, but her body's frailty held her back. This amulet would help her apply that strength at a range while controlling the rebounds so she wouldn't shatter from the blowback. It telekinetically redistributed the reverberations across her body instead of just her hand or foot.

Once she mastered it, this core would magnify her offensive potential. As for the dungeon heart vessel, I was at a loss. Althea constantly shifted shapes, so I couldn't decide what would suit her most. I decided to just ask her what she wanted later.

Moving onto the next core, I went with talon covers for Hod. That part of his body changed the least when he turned from Hod to Other Hod. The ascendant construct would serve two different purposes for his duality.

For Hod, it acted as a general guide that assisted with accomplishing different tasks. An ascendant core worked best because it was the mana of initiative. It gave more direction while quintessence would've laid back and offered simple suggestions.

I installed directives into the ascendant construct specifically for Hod to take advantage of that. The three main ones were psionic training, cipheric learning, and exploration of his unique magic. This gave Hod a path without being overbearing. I'd adjust it as needed, but before giving it to the guy, I placed the talon covers in my hands and tried them out.

Initial tests were promising. The covers sent out random goals that seemed doable and constructive. After a few minutes of wearing them, it changed its suggestions to stuff I considered worth my time or valuable. From what I could tell, this was one of the strangest aspects of ascendant-based cores.

They came from the bloodthirstiest kinds of mana, so I expected a Valgus clone. When unshackled, they were. After applying all the fail-safes and stop gaps, they became goofier, playful personalities. The ambition gave way to excitement, and the battle thirst turned into adventure seeking. It was a welcome and helpful surprise.

Stolen content alert: this content belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences.

As for Other Hod, the core gave him a psionic training partner for his future growth, and it offered a lesser version of Helios's gravitation/telekinesis. Other Hod needed as much training as possible to unlock his potential and Hod's in the future. The amulet even buffed the guy. It was almost too much for a single core but proved stable. After all, structuring a charm for both Hods wasn't easy.

Trying the primordial cores next, I set up the easiest of them - Torix's staff. This artifact would be a counter perspective for the lich to discuss with when needed. I put only a few restrictions on the primordial core to make that happen. Letting it run loose would give Torix's primordial magic a boost and provide him with someone to direct as he saw fit. In that regard, I trusted Torix to mold the core to what he needed.

Chrona's tail band came next. I set up a temporal manipulator within, requiring every ounce of power the blue core could muster. Using this would be arduous without understanding time magic, but that wasn't a problem for Chrona. She'd be using this in only a few days, tops.

The last three instruments took hours each.

The first was an engineering compass for Diesel. The guy earned his chops a while back, and I aimed to give him his just desserts. I gave him a dual-core setup of quintessence and primordial manas to make his artifact shine. I couldn't manage the tool's complexity with just one core otherwise.

In this case, the quintessence took the edge off the primordial's need for control. After all, I didn't want this tool to destroy Diesel's mind. The compass's dual-core nature also gave it the creativity and ingenuity the other instruments lacked.

Ultimately, the compass mirrored an architect golem, and it would be as if Diesel always carried his one with him. He'd be floored when I gave that with the personalized AI I planned on giving Diesel.

Probably. You never know for sure how someone would respond to a gift.

The next artifact was Plazia's primordial shoulder pauldron. I set this one up to help the hivemind establish control over areas via spatial magic. Well, that's what I think it did, but I was expanding into fields I didn't fully understand. The way I had it handle spaces involved leaning into what the material was made of - my dimensional fabric.

The way I did it was simple. See, my armor always carried a kind of personality, one that wanted growth and food. Instead of fighting that, I pulled as much of those aspects out of the material as possible. This amplified the natural properties of the dark metal.

I would never hand this to other guild members, but Plazia was an enormous psionic entity. Even from the few times our minds grazed each other, I could feel how monumental he was. He rivaled my psionic magnitude, if not a good bit higher. Because of that, his artifact didn't require extreme stability.

On the contrary, he would be that source of stability.

That left the most challenging construct: Amara's cipheric assistant. I attempted to create a core that helped her operate with the dimensional cipher. To call it a success would be like calling dough bread. I didn't know what would happen until it got out of the oven. Even my initial tests were spotty and confusing. It was still ready to ship, at least.

But, uh...Let's just say I put a lot of fail-safes on that one.

Once I finished making the artifacts, I walked over to Hod, Althea, and Shalahora. I'd been here for over a day, and they'd left and returned to this spot to train. Interrupting everyone, I handed Shalahora the earrings. He snatched them out of the air.

"What have you given me?"

I smiled.

"A surprise. Try them on."

He placed them where his ears should've been, and I explained how to use them. As they came to life, each core shifted from blue to a starry white. The ethereal glow contrasted his gloomy form, making him less sinister. He created a few balls of fire or ice before peering at me.

"Thank you, Harbinger."

"No problem. Let me know if anything goes awry."

I turned to Hod, handing him the talon covers. They snapped onto place via gravitational wells, their red runes ominous. Hod walked around with them like a waddling duck for a bit. As ascendant energy built in them, Hod hopped around, able to fly and control his descent using the dark armor plates.

He ran up into the air, testing out the telekinesis. He hopped around, flipping on air before kicking at a wall. It exploded, the telekinetic powers holding up well. Hod scratched behind his head by just moving his leg up and down.

"Hod never reach itchy spot. Hod must admit...Hod impressed. Itchy spot Hod worst enemy."

He bowed to me.

"Hod thank Harbinger for backscratchers. Hod never forget."

I smiled.

"Hod, never change buddy. Never change."

I turned to Althea, holding up the dimensionally enveloped ascendant core.

"I couldn't think of what to make this into for you because of your transformations. I'm open to any suggestions."

She frowned.

"You didn't want to make an amulet?"

I waved my hands.

"I just didn't know if you wanted something different. I'll get it done."

I turned to make it before she hopped up onto my shoulder. She leaned in and whispered.

"Can...Can you make it one of those neck things?"

"A necklace?"

"No, the ones that sit higher up on the neck."

I furrowed my brow before snapping my fingers.

"Oh, a choker."

She put her finger against my lips.

"Shh. It's embarrassing."

I nodded before she hopped off with an elegant flip. I got the measurement of her neck a few seconds later. After getting some black silk from a store in Mt. Verner, I started making the choker. Oddly enough, the store obtained the base material for the silk from Althea's eldritch reformations.

It was a small world.

I set the fabric as the choker's base before making a small chain around it. I didn't want the chain to be uncomfortable or inelegant, so I kept the interlocking segments soft and flattened. It made the process ten times more difficult, but the result looked like jewelry, not shackles.

Making the metal weightless, I finished it with the red core at the center. Returning to Althea's training spot, I handed her the choker, which she tried on.

It was too loose, hanging like a necklace at first. She pursed her lips.

"Huh. That's disappointing."

I went to help her take it off before the metal tightened around her neck. It gave a slight squeeze, and Althea leaned back before stumbling. I caught her, and she grew a foot taller in my arms. Her jumpsuit tore in a few places, and she blinked before staring at me.

"Wow. That's a rush, huh?"

I frowned.

"It's not too tight, is it?"

She rubbed her neck, her eyes soft when she smiled.

"Hmm...It's just how I like it."

I had to calm myself down before letting her continue her training. After a goodbye, I flew over to the forests of Mt. Verner. Instead of spending all my time handing out the artifacts, I called over the executive golem.

It walked up, a foreboding presence that stalked out of the trees.

"Ah, creator. It's great to see you again."

I pulled up the pile of artifacts with a gravity well.

"I need you to hand these to certain guild members for me."

The executive tilted its head.

"Wait a minute. Those?"

It stepped closer.

"Wow, those are incredible. They'll make each of your elites far more powerful."

It wiped a hand over one of the artifacts.

"But, creator, do you mind if I challenge your perspective?"

I gestured to the artifacts.

"Go ahead."

The executive rubbed its fingers together.

"There's dirt all over these, and they're haphazardly piled up. Let's take a moment and imagine with me for a second."

It waved its arms overhead.

"Think of it. Specialized containers for each guild head's enchanted artifact. They're in their different colors, and we've cultivated a space to hand them over with. No, even better, we can have the guild watch as you hand over these life-changing artifacts. They feel the impact of each one as you give them away."

I furrowed my brow.

"That, uh, sounds like a lot."

The executive waved a hand.

"If it feels overwhelming, know that I can arrange it all at a moment's notice. I could have it happening by tomorrow with a bit of hustle, actually. In fact, we should do that."

I frowned.

"I'm going to be busy tomorrow. For a while, actually."

The executive leaned forward.

"Might I ask what it's about?"

I described my plan for conquering Earth along with the need for golems. The executive clapped his hands together.

"That is genius, creator. It really is a solid, well-put-together plan. Now, I know it may feel like a lot, but do you mind if I mention an iteration to said plan?"

I got the feeling I'd hear that kind of phrase a lot from this golem. I shrugged.

"Why not? In fact, always let me know if you have an idea or improvement on something I've said."

The executive snapped his fingers with gusto.

"You show your mental resilience with your every word, creator. So, here are my thoughts - the plan is strategically sound but neglects the human element of the equation."

I raised a brow. My golem lectured me on the human element of a plan. There was an irony here somewhere.

"What do you mean? I've got the guild members helping out."

The executive raised a hand.

"That's right, and yeah, we know they'll help. You're the Harbinger of Cataclysm, for Schema's sake. What you say goes, but hear me out here: we need to give the people a reason why they should leave their homes and fight the good fight. It'll make enrollment much better and more satisfying."

I spread my hands.

"Ahhh, I get where you're going with this."

The golem made finger pistols at me.

"Can you tell me what you're thinking?"

I smiled.

"We'll use the gifting ceremony you mentioned earlier to announce the guild's conquest of Earth."

The executive raised his hands high.

"Come on, make it better."

I nodded.

"Alright, I'll make a bunch of gear and show the guild what they can earn while they head out with a golem. The better they do, the more they'll get. We'll have Speakers design quests, and they'll see how effective the artifacts are when I gift them to each follower."

The executive clasped his hands to fists, shaking them.

"Now that's a damn plan!"

I gave him a high five before the executive swung a fist.

"I'll arrange everything with an architect while you prepare the golems for the announcement. We'll need to strike while the iron is hot."

I grabbed my chin.

"If we have a stockpile of golems, we can have people sign up immediately. I can even have the piled-up goods behind us during the ceremony."

The Executive pointed at me.

"Perfect. I couldn't have said it better myself."

The golem's dual manas flared out of it like the depths of an ocean on fire.

"This has got me completely fired up. I'm canceling all my other plans for the next hot minute and getting this show on the road. Creator, we will make big things happen here and fast. Trust me on that."

I believed it. The executive lifted a hand, a gravity well launching it into the air. It jerked its other hand, propelling its body to Mt. Verner's lower side. As it disappeared, I dwelled on the executive's personality.

Somehow, it felt like a hype man more than a domineering jerk. In fact, I couldn't believe it operated so well, to the point it felt like talking with someone more than a thing I made. It left me wondering if that's what having a child was like, just in slow motion. I winced, knowing I'd probably never know that for myself.

I was likely sterile.

I sighed before turning around. Seconds later, the executive landed in front of me.

"Oh, creator, I forgot to mention something. You never visited the Eltari you made appointments with."

I closed my eyes.

"Dammit."

The executive put a hand on my shoulder.

"I had it rescheduled for tomorrow morning and managed the fallout by giving them new houses with an architect."

It gave me a thumbs up.

"Let's just say there's going to be many more people hoping you don't show up when you say you will."

It gave me a salute before launching away once more. I ogled where it once stood, stunned by how it handled things I'd forgotten. Shaking out my surprise, I looked around, finding the guild coming to life. Architects built in the distance, the blue core's barrier sheened over the horizon, and my vanguards carried back useful eldritch.

It left me basking in a quiet but boiling excitement. After setting the alarm for tomorrow morning with my status, I cracked my neck.

It was time to mass produce a golem army.

Chapter 389: The Tasks of a Ruler

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It left me basking in a quiet but boiling excitement. After setting the alarm for tomorrow morning with my status, I cracked my neck.

It was time to mass produce a golem army.

I lifted myself with a gravity well and propelled myself toward my golem creation facility. The large stone and glass structure stood from Mt. Verner but closer than I remembered. A bit of inspection revealed the illusion - guildmates erected buildings nearby, making the mountain look closer.

People wanted to live in the open since we weren't hiding anymore.

I relished that fact before one of my minds mentioned my status. The inspectors I sent out found something, so I opened my planet menu and Sovereign status. I found the flaw my mind mentioned, and they were twofold.

Firstly, I didn't have a perk for L-7. I sent a message to the Overseer to get that fixed, hoping for a timely response. The second 'problem' was that I wasn't supposed to have

my planet perks yet. The Sovereign class mentioned getting them from my Sovereign skill, not the class itself. I hadn't obtained that skill, so I got the perks early.

I neglected to mention that in my bug report.

While on the topic, I spruced up my status. I allocated my leftover skill points to the Owner of Worlds tree, not expecting anything.

You cradle the tales of time, your species' prosperity akin to your own. To have such power is merely a piece of this puzzle. You will learn to use it, growing into your abilities as they grow into you. You lay the roots of empire and authority from the will of your enactment. It will blossom into a vast tree that shades those under you.

+100% to City Barrier Strength

+100% to City Barrier Efficiency

+40% to City Barrier Size

+40% to Credit Income Multiplier from owned territories

+40% to Experience Multiplier from owned territories

+100% to Bounty Payout in owned territories

+100% to Bounty Experience Reward in owned territories

-40% to Warping Costs in owned territories

Sovereign Exclusive: +24% to World Perk Efficacy

A rush of energy coursed in, and I slowed it down again. I pulled out my grimoire, taking notes and trying to feel the energy flow. This mirrored watching a master at work, and I soaked in the drops of knowledge Schema left behind. After the power faded, I readied for the grueling production process.

Before I got into it, a rip in spacetime erupted beside me. The Overseer stepped out, about two heads shorter than me. Even a casual glance showed how improved his situation was since I last saw him.

His armor was fixed, no more missing patches or exposed skin lingering. Portions of his armor rippled, bending and molding with his movements. Even a psionic glance told me the Overseer's mind isolated itself from its surroundings far better than before. This gave the titan far more room for other ventures, one of them being his routine work.

The Overseer stared at his red status screen. He handled a dozen tasks simultaneously before peering closer at one of the screens.

"Interrupting my workflow for a bug report? Has Schema lost his mind?"

The Overseer peered up.

"What an immense waste of-"

The Overseer gawked.

"Time...You've changed yet again."

I reached out a fist.

"It's good to see the same for you."

He gave me a fist bump.

"I speak of wasting time, and you learned how to wield it."

I smiled.

"I've had a lot of extra moments while on L-7."

The Overseer gestured at me.

"Ah, the closest planet to Leviathan. It would've been over six months of Earth time there. I've yet to check, but did you win?"

I narrowed my eyes.

"Yeah. I did."

The Overseer nodded.

"At a cost, it seems."

I shrugged.

"Well, I guess you could say it was a journey."

The Overseer fiddled with his status.

"One drenched in the blood of Schema's enemies, apparently. He has sent me to fix your issue immediately. That prioritization is good since we will need your help in time."

I pointed at one of his electronic gauntlets as the metal rippled.

"Is that an upgrade?"

The Overseer shrugged, his armor molding to allow the gesture.

"Nanomachine technology. Schema needed to change to avoid losing the war, especially after recent events. It was this or die."

The Overseer opened his red status again, handling tasks rapidly.

"I would enjoy a chat, but I am pressed for time."

I watched him, no longer stunned by his pace. In fact, he seemed...Well, slow. It was hard to believe I could even think that, let alone feel it.

I nodded at him.

"Makes sense. You've got a lot on your plate."

I pulled out some of my dimensional fabric and a blue core. I etched into my grimoire before the Overseer tilted his head at me.

"No discussion? You've changed in more than the physical."

"What? No, I still want to chat for sure. Even while I'm doing this, know I'm listening."

The Overseer scoffed.

"Has the weight of your empire finally caught up with you?"

I scoffed.

"More like I've finally caught up with it. Anyways, what did you think of the lotteries?"

The Overseer clicked on my status, and a strange sensation passed over me.

"A failure. It is a shame, as the idea had merit. Its execution was abysmal. It made a new planet's culling look like a frantic series of successes by comparison."

I worked while talking.

"Yeah, tell me about it."

The Overseer took minutes preparing, testing, and trying out different solutions.

"I have been busy since. I am catching up on my responsibilities and enjoying newfound powers via nanomachine technology. It is a privilege Schema unlocked for us after we faced nanomachine tech from Elysium. Needless to say, Schema's is far more advanced and refined."

"I'd expect no less."

"It rivals his cipheric knowledge, second to none in the galaxy."

A comfortable silence passed over us. After a while, the Overseer dragged a hand down his faceplate.

"The perk is not recognized because L-7 is not in Schema-owned space. This makes documentation of the change difficult, and I cannot allocate resources without the proper procedures."

I shrugged.

"Don't worry about it. Take your time."

The Overseer kept hustling on his status. A few minutes later, he shook his head.

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"I will need to put in a clearance request for the change. This will take a few more minutes, and I apologize for this inconvenience."

I waved my hand.

"Don't stress about it. It's not pressing or anything."

The Overseer peered around, viewing the mountain through the glass walls.

"Mt. Verner is finally shaping up into a proper capital. You might look like a B guild here soon."

I let out a chuckle.

"Eh, I've never been that concerned with appearances."

The Overseer put his hands on his hips.

"I wanted to thank you for our talk last time. It helped me in a dark moment, and I...I don't feel as defeated. We will win, and my life as an Overseer has meaning again."

I smiled, warmed that he found a reprieve. After a second, I furrowed my brow, continuing to carve.

"I thought you'd be overwhelmed with Elysium's attacks right about now?"

The Overseer peered away.

"They are consolidating their gains from the recent lottery, so their attacks have slowed. Lehesion has also been quiet over the last week. When he does arrive, he's less effective than before. We have no idea what has occurred, but whatever happened has crippled him."

My smile widened.

"Good. No, great."

The Overseer squeezed a hand into a fist.

"It is and is not. This momentary ceasefire has given us a moment of respite. However, this has been the largest loss of Schema-owned territory since Baldowah's rebellion. Perhaps larger."

He threw his arm out in frustration.

"We have never seen anything like it, and a few avatars have also been unruly lately. It is...Disconcerting. They're planning something, and we know nothing."

Searching through my memory, I vaguely recalled Torix mentioning the Baldowah Rebellion at some point. I scratched my cheek while considering an odd piece of etching.

"That sounds like a tricky situation."

The Overseer sighed.

"I fear what is to come, but at this moment, I am appreciative."

I finished etching and charged my grimoire.

"Huh, appreciative. It sounds like you had a perspective shift."

The Overseer nodded.

"It is something I had forgotten of. There is no here and now when someone's time marches forth without fear of death. All is lived in the future and the past. This makes the present meaningless. It becomes a tool to mold the eventual, not a blessing to be cherished."

I molded a plate of my dimensional fabric, ensuring the proportions were just right.

"So after the fear of death passed, you gained an appreciation for life, huh?"

I kept molding. The Overseer paused.

"Is this not worth your time, or are you ignoring me?"

I shook my head.

"What? No. Not at all. I know you'll have your hands full here soon, so I'm trying to pass something along before you leave. Otherwise, I'd be offering you a drink."

I finished the grimoire's charging, the book bristling the air with an electric current. I pulled the runic markings off it, etching it into the dark metal. Along with a few screws, I handed the shoulder pauldron to the Overseer, the core embedded at its center.

"Since I can't offer the drink, this will have to do."

The Overseer shook his head.

"This is a powerful artifact. I cannot take it."

I waved a hand, pushing it to him.

"Please. I don't want to have to cozy up to another Overseer if you happen to die."

I set it on his shoulder.

"So, really, this is more for me than you."

I handed him the screws, and the Overseer grabbed the dark steel. He squeezed them in hand.

"You understand that Schema has fail-safes? If I am augmented by gear of any kind, I will die."

I nodded.

"I know. I made this expressly so your armor won't take you out. In particular, this adds an external psionic defense and other tricks for issues like Hybridization. You'll need it in the future, so get a permit or whatever to install it."

The pauldron on his shoulder oozed out with quintessant mana. I turned a palm to it.

"Trust me. It's worth the time."

The Overseer placed the screws into a pocket dimension at his side.

"I shall trust you then."

He pressed a button on his status, and my dimensional wake rippled. Mana flooded through me again, and I stepped back as I compressed myself. I shrank my wake and self in tandem, wanting to vomit. After a few blinks, I searched for the source of the disturbance.

The Overseer crossed his arms.

"That was your freshly minted planetary perk from your Sovereign class. Its previous iteration would've allowed you to sell dungeon cores for more credits. Schema wished to buy them, but I fought for this new version instead."

I opened my status screen, inspecting my planetary perks. I found the new one.

Leviathan-7's Expedited | +12.4% to Temporal Manipulation.

"Hah. That explains my nausea." I put a hand on his shoulder. "This is ten times better than more credits. Thanks."

The Overseer floated the pauldron over himself.

"And this is better than the psionic defenses that Schema arms us with. I shall treat it with care."

I grabbed it and crumbled the metal up. It erupted with sound as I did. Dropping it back down, the Overseer caught it. In seconds, the shoulder plate reformed. I pointed at it.

"Anything I make is durable, so always let it break first, not you."

A message popped up in the Overseer's status. Several followed.

"I would talk, but I must leave. There are many operations to catch up with after the war with Elysium. We must be prepared for the next wave of offensives as well."

The Overseer opened his dimensional rip before stepping through the portal. I waved a hand.

"Oh yeah, about your new perspective on time. It reminded me of a quote I heard a while back."

The Overseer turned as his warp began closing.

"Hm?"

I raised a hand.

"Always remember that today is a gift. That's why it's called the present."

The Overseer let out a metallic laugh.

"Then heed your words, Harbinger. I already learned that lesson."

The rip in space shut, and I stood taller. Seeing an old friend doing better left me rejuvenated. Just as well, I squeezed a hand. Even though subtle numerically, the difference in my time's flow was palpable.

It left my psyches more distraught in my wake, but that trained Temporal Compression further. Eventually, I may master it enough not to need my mind in the ether. As an anima perished in that space, I winced.

I could only hope this wouldn't get worse.

Reorienting myself, I contemplated my golems and why I made them. Starting that off, I brainstormed the kind of job they'd handle. They'd be sent out over vast distances to help and assist large settlements. In general, that required assisting with a few key concerns.

The most straightforward fixes were basic necessities. For some reason, I could generate matter with ease. My golems were no different, so creating water and shelters would be a cinch. As for food, that was harder to pass along, but a few rings with crab generation would help.

Yeah, sure, they'd get tired of eating crustaceans, but it was better than starving.

Another aspect my golems needed to handle were the eldritch. My golems had power and strength to spare, so destroying the monsters in mass had a simple solution. Keeping the golems killing only monsters was the real problem, and my guildmates were the answer. Therefore, I'd make these golems less aggressive than other variants.

Focusing on protection rather than assaults, I borrowed sigils from my guardian golems. From my experiences on L-7, the guardians worked well long-term. However, instead of protecting an area, they would guard a specific individual long-term. This would happen through a bonding process.

Quintessant golems matched well for that since the mana focused on the external, lining up with my goals. I put psionic defenses and two hovering plates over the golem's shoulders to prevent any of my guild members from being infested by Elysium or an eldritch. These shoulder pauldrons clicked on and off based on gravitation.

The golem could lob the shoulder plates out in a pinch to stop something from attacking a guild member. They could also be used for protection from the elements by locking them together. People could camp or sleep under them when they were like that.

Thinking more about it, most of the time spent on this mission would be traveling. The guild members would also be alone for extended periods. Remembering the loneliness of L-7, I brainstormed a few solutions. After a while, I came up with a few ideas worthy of implementation.

The most important tool was simple mental support. I made the golems offer encouragement about three times a day, and they would also ask simple questions. While nothing too personal, the golem provided a modicum of company.

From my experience, even small conversations made an enormous difference when away from home.

Having finished my carving, I checked the time. A few hours before the morning, I ramped up the industrial process. I pulled the elemental furnaces from my body into a small section of dimensional fabric. It connected to my main body, letting me use them still.

Before pulling my mind out of my body, I generated a short-range gravitational plate above. It hovered me a few feet off the ground. At the same time, I compressed my body to the utmost with Temporal Compression. This shrunk my golems, preventing thirty-foot monsters from running around.

The last step involved peering at my golem runes and etching them into myself. Instead of working on a blank slate, I put as many runes onto my skin as possible before I even began. This stopped me from having to carve in commonplace runes that all the golems and I shared.

I couldn't etch in personality-based runes or formative sigils since they may change my personality. Unfortunately, personality and mind creation runes included most of the runic work, but I saved plenty of time over the long term with even a few generic markings.

Once made, I pulled my mind out. To speed the process up, I created an extended panel of gravitation that could hold up many frames. Keeping my furnaces with me, I remade

body after body, hovering them forward with gravity wells. This manufacturing line kept everything organized and put the wheels of production in motion.

Within hours, I amassed hundreds of empty frames. They filled the entire golem construction facility in organized rows, golem after golem floating in nothing. Before carving, I made dimensional fabric girders above each golem line. I put quintessence crystals and runes on each side of the metal beams to keep the golems afloat.

This gave me leeway to leave without worrying about absolute devastation should a golem fall. The quintessence powered the gravitation, keeping it consistent, so I breathed that freedom in.

My alarm for visiting the Eltari popped up in my status. Having the allowance for it, I left the hundreds of golem bodies in place before flying over Mt. Verner. Reaching a lower peak of stones, I landed amidst one of the many Eltari encampments. It was a hut village with several mansions built beneath. If I had to guess, the Executive was responsible for the manors below.

The Eltari took no heed of them. Being rugged and adapted to the desert, the Eltari preferred the sunbaked stones near the bottom of the mountain. Still high enough for a view, the hilltop had sheer cliff faces, and the breeze carried the smell of rock, earth, and pine, making it feel homey.

Here, the Eltari constructed wide tents from various types of leather. They mixed several monster skins into the patchwork ensemble, but they tied it together symmetrically. This pattern gave the pandemonium purpose. It reminded me of staring at a collage.

Adding to the effect, dozens of teeth, bones, and other organic stuff hung in well-preserved bundles. The Eltari relished in these different art pieces, every hut having its personalized flare. From menacing to gentle, they never mirrored one another. That fierce distinction gave way at the ground, where the Eltari constructed a vast mosaic across the entire village.

A dozen huts all shared the same pattern, the reflective and glossy stones sheening in the sun. I walked down the paths, appreciating the Eltari above and their aerodynamic displays. Each person I passed landed before lunging to one knee, their reverence almost overbearing. Some bowed further, even murmuring prayers under their breath.

I raised my hands.

"Alright, at ease, everybody. I'm just here to see a few of Hod's friends, not fulfill a prophecy."

As I reached the largest tent in the area, I stared at a ten-foot-tall entrance. It was tiny. Wanting to move in, I left another mass of dimensional fabric outside. Walking nine feet tall, I found many deformed Eltari resting within. They hid from the beams of light peaking through their shaded space and covered themselves in the leathers of dark eldritch.

I snapped my fingers.

"Ah yeah, I remember you guys. You were, hm, er, the village elders from when I walked into Hod's village, right?"

One of the least deformed elders hacked out a cough. It raised a mangled wing.

"We are. Your reflection told us to be ready for your coming. We brought a feast and gifts, but you missed the ceremony."

I winced.

"Ah, sorry about that. You see, I got caught up making these amulets-"

A second elder waved his wings.

"No, please, don't apologize. We understand that our savior is called to action often, and sometimes, you cannot control it."

Unnerved by the term savior, I scratched the back of my head.

"Huh. Well, thanks for your understanding. I'm guessing the executive gave you guys those buildings below?"

The first elder nodded.

"It is a generous being. Please, sit."

It gestured to a circle made with mosaic stones on the ground. Everywhere else was beaten and bare earth. I sat cross-legged in the ring.

"Thanks. So, about Hod, what was he like before being eldritchified?"

The elders peered at one another, murmuring with guttural tones and noises. Making out what the others meant, the second elder raised dark wings.

"There was never a time before Hod was taken by the monster within him."

The white eyes under his hood narrowed.

"He has always been lost in his shadow."

Chapter 390: A Warped Past

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The white eyes under his hood narrowed.

"He has always been lost in his shadow."

I tapped the ground.

"So he's like Althea, being part eldritch or something?"

The elders murmured once more before the most disabled one of them spoke up. Her voice rasped with each word.

"Hod was the outcome of his parents fiddling with dark magic."

The other elders stared at her before a second elder stood up.

"You speak ill of our protector. Hod brought us to this land. He's the only reason we've survived."

In a wheelchair, the most disabled of them gurgled her words.

"But Hod is not like us."

Her eyes narrowed.

"You all remember what became of his mother when she gave birth to him."

Curiosity spiked in my chest as the wind brushed against the tent, leather bending back and forth. I crossed my arms.

"Unfortunately, I haven't got a clue what happened. Mind offering a refresher?"

She took a staff and pointed it at me.

"Harmana was covered in the same runes you have across your body."

I raised my left arm, a rune etched across it.

"Huh, then it's not really dark magic. It's cipheric, which is worse if you ask me."

She stabbed the staff into the ground.

"It was a defiling thing, and it's a miracle he didn't kill us all."

Flashes of Yawm's twisted body and Elijah turning into writhing flesh flashed before my eyes. I shivered, a cold pulse traveling up my spine.

"You're right about that."

The second elder hissed.

"You...Cease this blasphemy."

I raised a hand.

"I need to hear all of this, so just let her talk for now. I'll let you guys know if anything said is actually blasphemy."

Hint: it wouldn't be.

The elder bowed, his winged hands shaking. The decrepit woman stood, her eyes dim compared to the other Eltari. She hunched, her back like a spine's worst nightmare. She waved her cane.

"Harmana and Ahkam were Hod's mother and father. They bent reality in a corrupted pursuit of power. They created monsters that flooded into our world. They devolved our home planet into the twisted wasteland it became."

The second elder shouted.

"Our world was dying. They gave us food and water."

The hunched lady eltari narrowed her dim eyes.

"Yes, life may have returned, but it was a deformed version of it. Corrupted. Evil. The same could be said for the dark water they gave us to drink."

She raised her staff high.

"I still remember before Schema took away our world's life force. It changed everything. Even the monsters began to die."

My curiosity peaked. I leaned forward.

"Wait a minute."

I thumped the ground.

"Plazia, come here."

Seconds later, insects crawled out of the ground. I waved my hand at everything around us.

"Isolate us from Schema. You need to hear this, too."

The bugs etched cipheric markings that I charged with mana. Combined with my dimensional wake's pressure, we isolated this space from Schema. I tapped the ground beside me.

"Plazia, I'll send you a guild request. You can join because of a few privileges from my lottery. Also, keep a fragment of your mind here. Ooh, and thanks for all the help. I owe you one."

I sent the message, and Plazia accepted. A cluster of bugs huddled beside me before I raised my hand.

"Let's touch base. Dungeons are eldritch havens. From my understanding, Schema punished you for messing around with forbidden knowledge, right?"

The second elder sighed.

"We do not know. Many of our kind had dabbled with the prime language before. We understood it could warp reality and disrupt many things. However, Hod's parents...They evolved its usage."

I put the muddled pieces of their history together. It sounded like they'd been playing with fire for a long time, and eventually, Schema had enough after something devastating happened. Also, the fact they even elicited that kind of reaction meant the Eltari were gifted in the cipher. Interesting.

The second elder waved his wings.

"They tried to push for something more. I think Ahkam was driven mad by it."

I raised a brow. The woman elder scoffed.

"If you ask me, the real insanity was in the mother. Harmana agreed to have Hod born in one of the changed spaces."

I winced.

"She birthed Hod in a room corrupted by the cipher?"

The hunched elder hissed.

"Hod was conceived and lingered within the space the entire time."

I furrowed my brow.

"Like, as an egg or something?"

I didn't understand much about an Eltari's anatomy, and I didn't know if I wanted to fix that. The lady elder tapped her cane on the ground.

"She made the egg and laid it there. This was before the world faded into a shell of itself. Those two used dungeon cores to feed the ritual. It was excruciation to uncover what they had done."

The less crippled elder waved a wing.

"Ahkam and Harmana tested the space using other creatures first. They didn't want to harm their child."

I put my face in my hands.

"It's a space warped by the cipher. If you play with fire, you get burned. In this case, it sounds like they messed around with fire and acid by the sounds of it."

The less crippled elder tapped a wing on the ground.

"Perhaps, but perhaps not. There was nothing normal about Hod, even from an early age, but his differences were initially a blessing. He spoke near his birth, growing faster than the others. He saw through people's minds and understood their intentions. Nothing was hidden, and we considered him a seer who lives in prophecy."

I frowned.

"What's your names?"

The crippled one spoke up.

"I am Shahjk."

The less crippled one bowed.

"I am Monaba."

I nodded.

"It's great to meet each of you, and thank you for your time. So, Hod became more eldritch over time?"

Shajk paced up to me, her breathing painful and wheezy.

"He warped into something unrecognizable, not that he was ever like us. As we all bent and broke, Hod grew taller and stronger. He ingested the poisonous air, turning it to power. It fed on him as well, and the shadow unleashed."

I spread my hands.

"Er, so Other Hod wasn't there from birth?"

Shajk shook her head, her beak still glossy despite age's war against her other features.

"He was born without darkness, a creature of the light. It cast a shadow, one that enveloped him with time."

I narrowed my eyes.

"And after that, Schema's interference began, not before?"

The elders nodded, except for Monaba. He swung a wing, a feather dropping down.

"We don't know that for certain."

The first elder put a wing over his, lowering it.

"It hastened the fall of our world. That much we do know."

I tapped my thigh.

"How old is Hod?"

The woman elder laughed, the sound painful and strained.

"Many times older than you, child."

I stood up.

"Alright then. That's what I needed to know. Thanks, everybody. You've given me a lot to think about."

I jammed my arm into my pocket dimension and sliced it off. I melted, molded, and cooled the limb into rings within the space before pulling out new rings and my grimoire. After charging each set of runes, I floated the arcane sigils onto each ring. I handed them to each elder, and their conditions improved when they wore the trinkets.

Turning to leave, the Mobana gave me a deep bow.

"Let us know if there is anything else you need...And thank you, oh savior."

I smiled back.

"Remember, Hod saved you. Not me."

Walking out of the tent, I assimilated the dimensional fabric I had left outside. Growing much larger, I flew up and out of the village. Peering down, the mosaic across the village gleamed with a glossy sheen.

In a flash, I recognized a pattern across the ground. It mirrored much of the artwork for the village. Flying over the other Eltari settlements, I found other mosaics, each made in its own style. They symbolized their villages, the full marks visible when flying over them. It gave the spattered dotting of villages a surprising harmony.

As individuals, they chose their path, but they all were members of the eltari. It was a beautiful thing.

A pang of guilt crossed over me. I allowed those elders to suffer here for years before coming to help them with basic rings. Another one of my psyches mentioned how the system helped them immensely along with my legacy. In that regard, the rings were a piece of what I could give, not the whole.

Still, I let them rot. I would do everything in my power to stop that from happening again.

Letting that feeling settle down, I headed back over to my golems. I considered what the Eltari elders said. From the sounds of it, Hod could be decades, maybe centuries old. The Eltari's sense of time was different than my own, making that difficult to pin down. It wasn't like they had a clock to verify, either. The closest thing to that was the deterioration of their planet.

If I could get a grip on the time frame for that kind of advent, then I could pin down their ages. The thought of that erupted alongside a spike of anxiety racing through my chest. The Eltari's fallout had unnerved me since I learned about it. It made me question Schema in many ways, but I had always thought the Eltari were lodged in a rift that Schema protected.

I mean, they founded their village around a dungeon core that protected them from devolving. Schema was why that core came about, and it kept them from becoming nearly as monstrous. However, I was never certain of that. It was a blurry spot in the AI's already dubious morality. Based on what the Eltari said, Schema cursed their planet before Hod was born, but it accelerated afterward.

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Hm. It was an act of mass extinction, exceeding what Elysium did to Giess since it killed every species on an entire planet and for no discernable reason. I sighed, giving props to Schema. I mean, it was damn hard to out-evil Elysium, but somehow, somehow, Schema had found a way.

Why would Schema do that? It made no sense to destroy an entire planet over something so trivial. I flipped the question in my head, turning it into a statement. This

wasn't something trivial. To get a better understanding of the situation, we needed Hod to be fully returned. Outside of that, I'd need to inspect some dungeons and see if they couldn't unveil the situation some as well.

No matter how I sliced it, figuring this all out would take some time. Ooh, but I'd get my answers or die trying. Well, after making the golems, finishing my legendary compendium, making Torix's body, securing Blegara, er, uhm...A hundred other things? It was hard to remember them all.

I sighed, unable to handle all of this myself. Before anything else, I had to iron out a system for delegating some of my responsibilities to others. I couldn't do this alone, and I didn't have to. Those thoughts swirled in my mind as I floated beside my golem factory. While in the air, I gawked at several new roads that crossed the forest around Mt. Verner.

Grecian columns lined the roads with statues atop them. They immortalized several guild members, including many of the soldiers I remembered from the battle against Yawm or Elysium. It was a majestic sight. The more I saw, the more that feeling grew.

Every few sets of pillars, a statue would support an archway, and the artwork was sculpted to match one of my guild's followers. From Amara to Plazia, they exposed our guild's top talent. Hod's statue stood half flowing with shadow and half in his goofy gaze. Althea's statue carried her rifle with wings sprouting across her back. Kessiah carried her blood beside her, a patient below her. Even Krog and Chrona lounged about, each of them midway through a tail swing.

After a few of these sculptures, lifelike statues of me stood peering out from the roads that circled the mountain. At Mt. Verner's peak, a bronze statue of myself stood, peering forward. It held one hand up in a fist, standing tall and defiant. It radiated out with quintessant mana, the light-laden wind drifting into the clouds like a bleeding ichor from a god.

It was beautiful, but it embarrassed the hell out of me even just looking at it. Near the mountain's base, the fanciest sets of pillars signaled the entryway to an elaborate stage. Someone constructed a half-colosseum. Flowers, mana crystals, jewels, and precious metals decorated the entire area. Twelve pillars stood behind the stage, each with a plaque and banner.

They were the main players of my guild: Shalahora, Plazia, Krog, Chrona, Hod, Amara, Althea, Kessiah, Torix, Helios, Florence, and the newly appointed Diesel. The executive commanded two architects who whittled away at the project. They worked overtime to get the decorations set up.

I winced at how grandiose it would be, but that's what I made the executive for. If he was shameless, then I wouldn't have to be.

Before I let my growing dread dig deeper under my skin, I dove into my own work. I planned out a few delegations. I'd make a dungeon research team of interested individuals, including Etna. They'd focus on learning how dungeons were established, why they were teleported or changed, and monitoring how corrupted a dungeon was.

On a scale of one through ten, they'd assign values. Ten was a dungeon like L-7, where eldritch literally rained from the skies. One would be a fully contained dungeon like some of the earlier dungeons I visited. The dungeon-finding group would rate and list these dungeons in order of intensity. This would give me a solid set of places to visit for my own curated research should I ever get the free time.

It was doubtful, but hey, why not plan ahead?

As for Blegara, the planet needed the eldritch rebellions to be put down, but I didn't want to just kill the Vagni and the eldritch responsible for it. Well, most of the eldritch would have to go, but the Vagni were more than redeemable. Instead of eliminating them all, Plazia could dominate the planet via psionics and his general presence.

To make that happen, I needed to talk with the hivemind. I scheduled that after I finished making the golems. Getting to them, I etched in the runes I planned out earlier. The peaceful work preoccupied my mind, pulling me away from all the world's worries. Hours passed as I stayed still, compressing time to get the most out of each second.

I marked the pages telekinetically, not needing to move to write in my grimoire. As time passed, some of my psyches wandered. This...It was a strange life I lived. The compression of my wake gave me many advantages, and it trained my mind in a way few challenges could. However, it made quiet moments like these a torment.

The sickness in my stomach and malaise of my mind never relented, becoming a chronic issue I adapted to rather than dealt with. Finding a way out of my torment

required a better understanding of my dimensional wake and its properties. At the same time, I felt the limits of my flesh and bones.

To be more precise, my humanity. I was no longer a human, but my mind thought and perceived reality like one. That, in itself, was a shackle, and I would need to overcome it at some point. It would allow me to unchain myself from limits I didn't know about. Not just the mental barriers but even perceptual limitations, all of it could fade if I took this next step.

I trembled at the prospect. It was a wild thing. Limits, they didn't just hold us down. They anchored us. They gave us a sense of perspective and kept people low to the ground. It's what we were built for and evolved to. Anytime I'd ever seen a human try to step across that boundary, it ended with horrifying consequences.

And yet, it felt inevitable for me. I would develop new senses, create a more efficient body, and craft a mind that exceeded a mortal's psyche. Hell, I already had split my mind into a dispersed cloud of magic pixy dust, basically. I wouldn't stop there, either. This was the tip of an iceberg, one that led deeper than any ocean.

And that terrified me.

I'd seen Yawm devolve into a deformed shade of himself. I'd watched Lehesion become the whipping dog of Elysium, his guilt eroding his will to live. Valgus lost his entire being to his desire for power, and Shalahora had also lost every aspect of himself. Even factions like Elysium extinguished their common sense in the pursuit of influence.

Absolute power corrupted absolutely. I'd heard that quote since I was a child, and I believed it. I would need to be different. Immutable. Unchanging. An unwavering force at the minimum. To make that happen, I devised a plan to maintain my sanity. It required two things - socialization and a reference.

It seemed simple, but every person I just mentioned failed to consider either factor. Yawm isolated himself from his species whenever he became Etorhma's avatar. Lehesion's reincarnation resulted in a mental isolation that caused some crazy disassociation from his species and world. Valgus was the same as Yawm, and Elysium was like an echo chamber of crazy people.

The odd man out, Shalahora, had kept his species with him, so he talked plenty. It was no coincidence that he was the only one out of the bunch who wasn't outright insane.

Like Shalahora had, I would foster the other perspectives around me. Otherwise, I'd be driven mad like the others,

and my insanity would be one that never ended.

This plan gave me direction, and it mitigated my fears. That was something I'd uncovered on this journey into Schema's system. Even if I developed my body and mind, it didn't mean I was immune to emotion. I cherished that, knowing my emotions kept me grounded in this insane pursuit.

Listening to my fears, I would keep my personal relationships grounded. In a dichotomy of action, my efforts for self-strengthening would be matched by my pursuit of everyday mundanity. In a sense, I would outsource my sanity to the people around me. After all, it was a burden I didn't need to bear all alone.

That series of thoughts left me feeling good about moving forward with my wake's powers. It also burned through a decent chunk of time as I carved, something I had let several minds do while the others channeled mana and handled the finishing details. Once finished with the etching, I charged and guided the glowing runes onto one of the floating golems.

The markings sizzled into the metal, letting out a deep hiss that echoed in the facility. As the golem sparked to life, quintessence flooded into the markings. It lunged to a knee.

"Creator. It is a blessing to see you."

I raised a hand.

"At ease. Let's head out for a while."

I turned and waved a hand. It followed, and we left out the upper entryway. Instead of going around Mt. Verner, I bolted away from the place. After crossing a hundred miles South, we followed an interstate road before getting off at a random exit.

The dilapidated town rested in ruins. Crushed buildings and forested lawns covered every block. Streets split them up into a nice set of squares like some overgrown

checkerboard. No monsters roamed the streets since my guild cleared this place out a while back. We hadn't cleaned this spot out since.

That's why this was an excellent spot to find a test dungeon.

To that end, the golem and I walked the streets. Side by side, we took up an entire four-lane highway. Standing at my full height, I stared at the streetlights. Well, the few left here. Something uprooted them from the ground, taking the power lines with them.

It wasn't that unusual. Many scavengers harvested the wires for the lightweight aluminum. Still, they took great care to pick this town apart. Setting that aside, we crossed many smashed homes before I looked into one. Someone or something had stripped the utilities and machinery from the place. These were metal-starved scavengers.

Minutes later, we walked through the dense cluster of the town. As we did, my golem crushed the ground, and its steps shook the earth. While cool in theory, its thudding stomps shattered windows and destroyed nearby walls. It wasn't a problem when the houses were further away, but these buildings were erected beside the roadside.

They felt every ounce of the golem's mammothian steps, and in turn, the buildings screamed out in agony. As one collapsed, I raised a hand.

"You really need to-"

The golem found a small eldritch nearby. Fueled by an immutable objective, it leaped through the air. It smashed through a house and sent cars flying from its gravitational strength alone. As a truck clapped into a building's roof, the golem crushed a squirrel-sized monster with its fist, releasing a shockwave of bone and blood.

Taking the chunks in its hand, it slammed the creature into the ground.

A house nearby disintegrated. Planks of wood gouged three feet deep into the soil, portions of the grass scrubbed clean. My golem stood from its crater, mana oozing out its runes like a thick fog. Its voice was a dark metal.

"Creator. The eldritch has been eliminated."

I facepalmed at the wanton destruction. I was somehow impressed and horrified at the same time. That kind of overreaction would need to be fixed. After letting it know not to break everything in sight, we walked past a suburb. Nostalgia passed over me, the sights of a bygone past swimming over me like bittersweet memories.

We turned down an intersection to the heart of the ruined town: a strip of shops that used to house the local businesses. I gazed at the miniature buildings, full-sized structures looking like large model houses at this point. Between two buildings, we found the piled-up power lines, the wires coiled around a set of monster corpses.

They were green, poisonous griffons, and something tied various batteries and engine blocks to the rotting bodies. Appliances littered the entire space, and gas cans sat around the area. As my imagination searched for an answer, reality heard its call.

A set of rats crawled out of the buildings, all coordinated and in sync. Their tails glowed a cerulean blue, and they let out a symphony of squeaks wherever they crawled. They swarmed over the restrained monster corpses, electrocuting them. The monster corpses reared to life, their bodies responding to the electrical signals.

Some ooze poured out of them, and the rats feasted on the material. The batteries charged, but nothing happened with the engine blocks. Once the rodents finished feeding, they cuddled up to the car batteries, calling it a day.

I furrowed my brow.

"How did they get the powerlines here?"

Hearing my voice, the rats turned to me. Electricity built around them, arcs of lightning spiraling. They huddled together into a ball while streaks of light sparked around them. The engine blocks levitated into four limbs before wires wrapped around them. The now thirty-foot junk colossus stood, composed of the town's magnetized machinery.

I frowned.

"Ah. That's how."

The terrifying monstrosity leaped over the wires, and I gestured to it.

"Alright, golem, show them what you're worth-"

The golem dashed forward in a blur of movement. It smashed the rats into a pulp with its body, blood splattering everywhere. Violence and force erupted. Shards of bone stuck halfway in the buildings, engine blocks hurled through stone walls, some lobbed miles into the air. The windows shattered near us from their collision's shockwave.

An oppressive panel of gravitation enveloped the entire expanse. The golem used it to fight, and it pulled the remaining rats together. Everything nearby siphoned further into a collapsing point, including the buildings ripping out of the ground. The gravitational well ripped out every bit of the concrete, rebar, lamps, and pavement to a singular, circular bulk.

As magic coursed through the golem, quintessence billowed off of it, a semitranslucent cloud infesting everything nearby. In its radius, wildlife expanded in cancerous growths. With the mana, the golem siphoned all inward. The nearby trees were uprooted, and dirt flew. The golem compressed the mass with overkill energy, thin needles of rat blood spurting out of the hulking orb.

The blood spiraled around the sphere. They were like red rings orbiting a rocky planet. The rings splat against the ground as the golem released its sorcery. The ball crushed into exposed earth, ripping out crags of compressed dirt. The soil crags reached for the air like drowning men.

The golem flew up, inspecting the nearby area, ensuring no monsters survived its slaughter. I gawked at the mass destruction and leveled blocks. The gravitation alone would've killed anyone nearby, let alone the mana or shrapnel. As the golem landed beside me, the ground quaked around us, another crater forming. It lunged to one knee.

"I have done it, creator. All is dead."

I dragged my hand down my face.

"Yeah. Everything. Did you even check the buildings to ensure people weren't in them?"

The golem gazed back. It nodded in slow motion.

"Ah...I am sorry, creator. That...Is advisable for future clearings."

I sighed. These golems caused different problems than my old ones. Instead of dealing with weakness, I dealt with absurdity. The golems were too strong; even with limiters, they'd wreak havoc. The blue cores fixed that issue, but I maintained a limited supply.

Using all of them for this would leave me without any cores for actual cities. Without an obvious solution to the problem, I considered the issue for a while. Nothing came out of the woodwork of my mind, and even having multiple psyches argue didn't help. Getting a fresh perspective, I sent a message to Torix, Plazia, and Diesel, wanting them to meet the following day.

Leaving the abandoned town, the golem and I headed back to Mt. Verner. I stopped golem production and spent my time researching various memories of my cipheric runes. In particular, I paid close attention to the saved image of Baldag-Ruhl's sigils from so long ago. They still boggled my mind after all these years, his inscriptions far outweighing the complexity of anything else I'd ever seen.

From Schema's spear shard to the Old One's scripts over Yawm, nothing rivaled Baldag's work in both scale and magnitude. It was magnificent, and he was a true visionary. Using my memory, I gazed at the incantations. They reminded me of gazing at galaxies, an endless set of secrets all hidden in plain sight.

As that awe passed over me, I parsed through some of what they implied. The most relevant information came from Baldag-Ruhl's perspective. Unlike most of my magical understanding, Baldag-Ruhl associated mana and the mind with a soul. This changed the outcome and product of what he created.

By attaching a changing and developed mind to something, Baldag-Ruhl created a growing potential in whatever he made. My armor was the best example, but even his mana pools worked under the same premise. They soaked in the ambient mana that Schema used to contain his dungeon rift.

In fact, it was more genius the more I looked at it. He evaded the limitations of his situation while enabling himself in the long term. My reading solidified Baldag-Ruhl's

status as a world-ending horror if he'd escaped. That's why Schema had isolated his rift and given it a Sentinel guard.

That required an enormous amount of mana to maintain, and Baldag-Ruhl infiltrated that mana like a parasite sucking blood from its host. Hell, the guy might've set up the situation for just such an outcome. I couldn't put it past the hive. His ritual also drew extra mana from an actual dimensional tear to finalize the product.

These dimensional energy sources instilled the characteristics that eventually changed me into a living dimension. Wanting to know more, I pulled out the portion of a dimensional slicer I obtained from the twisted Sentinel on Blegara. I compared the cipheric markings with Baldag-Ruhls, finding quite a few differences.

Schema's cipher markings were resolute, efficient, and defined. They carried many optimizations that lowered the cost of wielding and using the spears. To me, that made perfect sense. The AI was a master of managing limited resources, after all. Baldag-Ruhl's carapace project did the opposite.

It only operated around maintaining stability and adding growth potential. Since it drew from a seemingly infinite source of energy, Baldag-Ruhl wanted an infinite outcome. That goal gave the armor an insidious nature, one that had an impact on me occasionally but was, in all honesty, very limited.

The final pieces of runes I analyzed were the cipheric incantations over Yawm. Something about the Old One's usage reminded me of a mad scientist; they used wild, insane combinations of runes. On the surface, they guaranteed corruption. At a deeper glance, they promised power, pure and palpable.

And corruption.

If I could find a way to fuse all of their runic qualities, I could become a runic master, the likes of which I'd never seen. Even after my hours of study, that was all I gained from observing and testing sections of their sigils. All the individuals far exceeded my own abilities, but they gave me hints of how to proceed moving into the future.

Optimization for my fundamental runes would come from taking Schema's approach. For larger projects, Baldag-Ruhl's sheer vision would be necessary. A drop of madness from the Old Ones would magnify my inscription's potency. It could all come together and create something heaven-defying.

Closing my grimoire and status, I left my golem production facility at dawn. I headed towards the third floor of Mt. Verner, flowing through a few ducts lining the interior. As I coursed into the library, I pulled off an enormous amount of dust from myself. The ventilation shafts needed a clean-up, and I was the duster.

I hovered a two-foot-tall ball of lint beside me. I landed near several bookshelves, condensing the dust orb into a dense fabric. Keeping myself fifteen feet tall, I hovered another mass of dimensional fabric behind me. It reminded me of a ball and chain, though it gave me freedom rather than taking it away.

Sliding between two tall shelves, I found the others waiting. Diesel stared forward, wearing the same workman's outfit as before. Sleeplessness etched lines on his face, and dozens of satchels held tools that smothered him. He paled from the last time I saw him.

Finding his cause of concern, Plazia rested on a basalt throne in the middle of the room, having moved a few bookshelves to do so. Torix rested on a leather couch like Diesel, and the lich's metal skeleton gleamed darkly in the lamplight. As he approached, he turned to me.

"Ah, Daniel. You mentioned issues with a number of projects."

His fire eyes flared.

"Perhaps we may be of assistance."